

THE HAND OF GOD



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TO EVERY WOMAN
WHO
HAS BORNE A CHILD
WITH GLADNESS
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.



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FOREWORD

Among those who are studying the history of very ancient peoples, a theory is rapidly gaining ground that the principles of sex-worship underlie all modern religions.

If, at the first glance this view seem irreverent (and it may be admitted that the history of phallic worship must be written in paragraphs often offensive to our empirical moral sense) yet at no times are the emotions underlying these ancient systems of the expressions of religious feeling at variance with what is essentially good.

Even under the masses of revolting perversion into which the original principles of sex-worship degenerated, there are still to be found traces of the noble strife of the individual to insure the common good by losing itself in the reproduction of a new and better being. We say better being, because everywhere we find the inevitable attraction of the strong for the weak and of the beautiful for the less-favored.

Since this study of the derivation of religious customs has been pursued, many parts of the Bible that heretofore have not been satisfactorily interpreted, assume a most interesting aspect. These passages invariably refer to practices that grew out of the primitive homage that simple, ancient peoples paid to the powers of procreation and from which by slow evolution we have derived our ideas of sin, of the Atonement and of the Redemption.

There are certain Pagan side-lights on Judaism to be had, for instance, from Renan's "History of The People

of Israel," that lead us to suspect that the chronicler of the book of Judges laid masterful, proselyting hands on the rich stores of heathen legend about him when he wrote his tale of Samson and Delilah.

Renan suggests that the name Samson has some relation to the word *soliculus* (little sun); and that the fact that the sun-god was represented by a circle surrounded by rays, like streaming locks of hair, may account for the dramatic feature of Samson's strength being vested in the "seven locks of his head" and his consequent weakness when Delilah "shaved" them off.

We have assumed for our purpose, that Samson was a sun-god, the symbol of the active element in procreation, which, caught up by the female principal, loses its individual life in the accomplishment of the production of a new being.

According to this same theory, Delilah, whose reputation is sacrificed so ruthlessly in the text of the Old Testament, was essentially a personification of what is eternally feminine.

Under the parable and imagery with which the ancient story-writer overlaid her motive and glossed her undeviating following out of her destiny, we find the world-old, tragic story of the individual's subserviency to the racial good.

Even the single-minded Hebrew who wrote the story of Samson and Delilah that we find in the book of Judges could not altogether conceal the real Delilah in his figures of rhetoric. Sublimely obedient to the forces conditioning her, she weaves the toils of a common destruction around the man whom she is to reproduce and thus render immortal. Side by side, in a mutual ecstasy of sacrifice they pass through successive stages of self-immolation to the point of supreme demonstration where

the death of the progenitors is triumphantly redeemed by the new life.

It is not, therefore, because of the interest attached to the names, Samson and Delilah, that attention to this story is chiefly claimed: we have offered, first of all, an interpretation, in individuals, of the process of the historical, human passion. And for this theme, from the standpoint of love's inevitability and purposefulness, we trust we have found a not unfitting illustration in Rodin's exquisitely powerful statue, "The Hand of God."

For what of Hebrew tradition has been borrowed from the version of the Samson and Delilah story as given in the book of Judges, we make full apology. For the liberty we have taken in running counter to the ancient prejudice against Delilah, we offer in extenuation the drawing of a still more ancient ideal of womanly tenderness and constancy.

BOOK I

THE FEAST OF ASSHUR

CHAPTER I

Sorek lay in the moonlight in sumptuous, regal isolation. Her four-square walls with their towered corners were pierced each by a single gate, sculptured in chimera, magnificent and mystic. At the north lay rolling pasture-lands whence came the priceless carpets, rivaling for sheen and softness the silken stuffs that the crawling caravans drew ceaselessly from out the yellow desert eastward, and under the southern wall began the garden of Arabia, flinging the scent of her roses and acacia far over the flat, fertile plain. To the west lay the Syrian desert and beyond that were Gaza and the sea.

Tradition has it that Sorek was built by a queen of Persia as the gift of a perfect city when her lord should return from the war. Certain it is, however, that a people of unusually mild and cultured habit tended its gardens and peopled its palaces and that the Hebrews, weary of the long flight from the valley of the Nile, found homes for their families and adventure for their peculiar talents within the gates whose carven chimera seemed merely harmless ornament when they recalled the hated gods of the Pharaoh.

With the price of the precious things of which they had despoiled the Egyptians, the Jews bought their

booths for traffic and within two generations, so strong had become the current of give and take between Israelite and Pagan that Persian princes married Hebrew maids and the ancient holders of the soil saw no threat when a temple of Jahveh was built on a high place overlooking the flat-roofed houses and hanging gardens. But the native caravans going westward grew steadily and when Gaza, gnawing at her bare bones in hungry discontent, caught scent of the fatness of Sorek, reminded of her ancient quarry that in the days of her fulness had been held with such loose leash, she suddenly brought down her Philistine claws full upon it.

Thus it was that Sorek came by her Syrian governors and Israel found herself again a bonded underling. Not as in Egypt, however. Nightly the temple of Jahveh sent its challenging beacon over the pagan town and day by day, jostling Persian and Syrian alike, the Jewish merchants offered and sold their wares in open competition with their political masters. Intermarriage, however, was discontinued and an admixture of Hebrew blood was, if possible, denied in pagan families.

There was little to remind the people that Mesech, the second of the Syrian governors sent out to Sorek from Gaza, was once their townsman. He left Sorek, a gay, inconsequent soldier and returned after twenty years a grave, elderly man whose patience with hot-blooded, tyrannical Philistines was like his tolerance of calculating, insistent Jews.

Near the south wall, on a terrace setting it a little above the town, was a magnificent assembly house built by the Israelites in the day of their favor. This, Mesech chose to remodel to his use as an executive palace and home for his household. The walls, broken only by two doors and rare clusters of windows, formed two stories of rooms surrounding a princely garden. Ample courts, cooled by fountains and shaded by vines trained over lattice supports, divided the quadrangle of rooms into convenient domestic apartments; and the roofs were planted with shrubs and flowers and furnished with most luxurious devices.

The parapet around this house-top was of solid marble sculptured in relief and the porous, limestone floor was laid with strips of thick, gorgeous carpet. Vines, starred with white, scented flowers, twined the marble posts that terminated the balustrade around the stairway leading to the floors below and a canopy, sparkling with a silver thread shot through the blue of its embroidery, shaded a couch near which stood low stands bearing their burden of musical instruments, fruit and wine.

On this particular night a man was standing alone in the moon-lit silence, scenting the sweet of the blossoming shrubs, drawing with audible inspiration the keen, cool air. He stood, slim and straight, in his pliant leather body-coat and long brown stockings. The thick curls clustering around his cap, proclaimed him a freedman, if the glowing brazier he held—a

quivering stab in the blend of blue and silver—marked him for a servant. Below, to the left, was the khan, noisy and crowded but no distinct sound reached this luxurious retreat. In front, far below was the deserted market-place; then came the town whose wide, white streets seemed only garden paths so consistently and well were the courts and house-tops planted.

Beyond to the north, at east and west were the two temples that vied for the souls of men. The one, built on a bleak cliff could be reached only by a score of rough-hewn stone steps: the other, nestled among the trees of the long famous hill of Astarte, was approached by a sinuous path of gentle ascent. But Ahab shrank from the sight of the glittering grove of the goddess—its delights were not for such as he, to-night. Turning, he bethought himself of his task and going to the tripod nearest the stairway lifted a white-hot coal with the tongs. At that instant, a young woman glided up to him from below.

“Spare thy fire, Ahab!”

The coal dropped on the purple powder.

“One breath of thine too late, my Selma; else should I have heeded thee.”

She backed until she stood braced against the marble post, the white blossoms clustering about her face. The smoke began to wreath upward and she followed the growing spiral with her eyes. Her small head was bound with a white scarf that hid her hair except where a soft, black fold drooped over each temple.

A white underdress was almost covered by a bluish-green mantle richly embroidered in scrolls of gray, green and black. The figure was dainty and pretty but the head was set too far forward on a thin, short neck and the shadowed eyes gave the round, childish face a cast of sorrow that was no mark of an individual's suffering but the stamp of the travail of a race.

"Better had I laid the brand on thy heart, thou—Snow of the Mountain!"

The brazier went clattering to the floor and the man was pinning her to the post with a half-serious ferocity.

"When wilt thou answer me?"

She smiled up at him calmly, wholly unafraid. "I am not made for love, Ahab—but for servitude—for—"

"Tuh! thou nursest thy grief!" He flung her away from him, stooping to gather up his tools—then lifted his head. "Thou wilt not lift thy little finger to quit thy serving!"

She leaned toward him her white veil trailing over his hands, her deep eyes smiling an unconscious challenge.

"See, Ahab," she answered, spreading out her small, ivory-tinted fingers, "see, if I raise my whole hand, if," she opened her arms as if to lift him, "if I raised even thee—yet—am I bond—"

With a cry he sprang toward her, but seizing the glowing basket by its padded handle she held it laughingly between them.

"To thy task!" she shouted gayly.

He made as if to dash the barrier away but something in her face stayed him. "Thou daughter of Astarte!" he panted, "why dost thou come to me with thy perfume and thy trailing garments to finish the madness that this season and my dreams of thee had flung over me!"

Gradually the laughter died from Selma's face and the brazier trembled, but she answered not a word.

"Why dost dog my footsteps with thy smile beyond which is no warmth and thy show of love beyond which is no desire!"

He paused, wetting his dry lips and her breath left her in a long, shuddering sigh. Instinct, beaten back through centuries by the subtle casuistry of the Jew, tried to fight its way in her up to knowledge, but there was also her heritage of weakened physical energy to reckon with and she lowered the brazier—but of wonder, not in acquiescence. She bent toward him with parted lips but the glowing thing still hung like a censer between them. A faint, prolonged shout from Dagon's festival reached him.

"What dost thou mean!" he gasped. "Dost thou not know that this is the feast-day of Asshur, whom the ignorant Syrians call Dagon? And—that all men who are not slaves, go tonight to serve the sacred maidens in the grove? Dost know that this is the springtide of the year—that blossoms kiss and cling on the wind-blown stem—that beast claims beast—

that maid calls to man in this festival of the regeneration of life?"

Selma dropped the brazier and stood quietly before him—serious, reproachful.

"Thou Persian with thy many words," she said, "I understand no whit of anything thou sayest. I love to tease thee but I love thee not to touch me—I crave thy good words but," her voice broke a little, "cannot brave thy anger."

The tinkle of distant music floated to Ahab from over the house-tops. He knew whose fingers brushed the wires and whom the strains were calling. That one had dropped like a ripe pear into his hands for the mere touching—but this one? He could not understand what lay behind the patient eyes that still questioned him reproachfully. He dropped to his knees and with stubborn care balanced the tongs in place. Could she be honest in calling herself bond? The Lady Delilah herself, did not know and was it possible that this girl—? He looked up at her suddenly.

"Selma—didst ever think why thou, a Jewish woman, art in the house Mesech than whom no man in Sorek is more despised of thy people?"

She smiled sadly. "I was bought as a playmate, a companion for the Lady Delilah."

"But why a maiden of Israel?"

She shook her head slowly. "Think you—because we were wanderers—are outcasts, that I might be the better servant?"

Ahab rose, standing determined before her. "Hast

ever felt a sympathy with the Lady Delilah—a tie—as of blood?”

“Ahab!”

“’Tis said! Thou art true cousin to Delilah. Her mother was of Israel.” Selma put out her hands in dumb inquiry. “No—no—nor servant of any sort. She was wooed as a daughter of kings is courted and so much was her will respected in this Philistine house that her little motherless niece was—”

“I!”

“Just so. Fed, bedded and petted as the Lady Delilah herself and yet—” he smiled in derisive accusation—“because she wills it, bond and—”

Clangorous, up from the street, came the sound of metal doors, beaten by sword-hilt.

“Mesech!” he gasped. “On the feast-night of Asshur! The temple is not yet dark!”

He pointed to the hill where myriad lights flitted like fire-flies through the trees. Selma, as one dazed, followed his glance. Again the imperious beating set up.

“Ah,” and the girl roused herself. “Ahab! What folly do we talk! I was sent to tell thee—Manasseh bade me say that the Lady Delilah will retire and that the Lords Abdul and Jezrah meet the master here in council tonight and that thou art to await their coming. Go—entrance for them!”

“A kiss for me!”

“My hand!”

“Thy Heart, my Pearl!”

CHAPTER II

The three men sat unconscious of the beauty of the night, unmindful of the dying lights in the grove of Astarte, unheeding the especial comfort placed before them. Sherbet at their elbows exhaling sweet, insistent perfume melted to an insipid syrup. Fragrant fruits bedded in pyramids of snow, sank slowly, crushing the flowers that wreathed them.

Untempered by such fire and frost of experience as besets a member of the royal household at Gaza, Jezrah, provincial Captain of the guard, chafed under the restraint of the envoy.

"It worketh hardship on us all," he finally burst out, unable to endure the tension longer, "on thee, my Lord Abdul—"

"It doth not matter what present look the concern hath at Gaza," Abdul interrupted, his low, resonant voice winning in a moment over the other's violence. Then he turned to his host whose fingers beat a mechanical tattoo on the sword across his knee, unconsciously keeping time to the music that still called from the house-tops across the town.

"Time will justify our parts, is it not so, Mesech? If the tax be forthcoming at harvest, the court at Gaza hath no question concerning our wards of Israel. Meantime," and he smiled confidently, "were it not

well to remove without much ado or sign of conflict such leaders as may in judgment be held responsible for dissension? Is it not true that one Samson is the choicest spring of unrest? To slay the body doth not one strike at the head?"

"Head!" shrieked Jezrah, darting desperately toward him, "how sayest thou head. Grind him to meal, burn him to ashes, yet he liveth—liveth in every dragging foot that entereth the temple! Head indeed! If 'twere given me to handle this matter I should begin with the first Israelitish face I meet and ere another were reached, it would enrichen the earth they make so lean! Of their slaughter-house of a temple not one stone would I leave on the other!"

Mesech's tattoo ceased. His shoulders, just beginning to take on in moments of relaxation the curve of years, straightened to the line of their prime and he met Jezrah's fury with a gravity born of something more than the sense of a governor's responsibility.

"There thou overstepest the bounds, Jezrah. The covenant between Israel and Philistia forbids fire and sword—even the lash, unless it be given for tried offence."

Abdul who had been unmoved by Jezrah's outburst, now frowned uneasily.

"'Tis surely within thy power to adjudge Samson guilty, at least of rebellion, under the law."

"Nay, Abdul, there lieth the difficulty. He hath committed himself in no manner. Only from babbling

women and grumbling graybeards doth one gather rumor of revolt. Assyria is watching: she covets the gold our Hebrew wards pour into Gaza. To strike at Samson now were signal for instant interference."

Abdul's frown deepened and Jezrah watched it with malicious satisfaction. Half apologetically Mesech added: "It seemeth best to avoid conflict with our Assyrian neighbor until the nearest tax has filled the royal coffer."

"But if he should be got at secretly?"

"Nay," and Mesech sighed, his shoulders drooping ever so little. "Sorek is not Gaza."

"But—mind thee, man! Sorek may become Gaza! If some mysterious power should slay this Samson, his people, witless sheep, cowed by the forbidding sign would turn again to their grazing." He looked from the troubled face of the Governor to Jezrah. "Thou, Captain! What sayest thou to such service?"

The Captain shook his head. "'Twere easier to destroy all Israel than to slay this one priest. It hath been tried," he added grimly.

"Dost thou," and Abdul turned again to Mesech, "give credence to such foolish talk?"

"I may not tell thee with assurance. I have not been called to test the mortality of those whose protection was given as a part of my office," and a weight of sadness tinged the pride in Mesech's tone, "but common report hath it no sword slays Samson: his vitals

are proof against poison and an arrow-wound healeth in a night!"

"At least, it is plain, he is not to be overcome by common means," Jezrah added triumphantly.

"But 'tis farther said," went on Mesech as if fascinated by some potent influence, unwillingly communicative, "if he be corrupted with wine or taken in sleep, he shall be as other men."

"Then do thou offer him the full cup!"

"He drinketh no wine!"

The Philistine courtier, smiling in spite of his great disgust at the confidence both men seemed to have in the unalterable character of a provincial priest's prejudice, turned to Jezrah.

"Canst get at him, while he sleepeth?"

"He sleepeth only in the temple!"

Abdul rose to his feet, tossing his cloak from him in his disquietude. He remembered well what cause had been given for granting religious tolerance to the Jews in Sorek. Did not every soul in the province, high and low, feel a certain fear of this god whom the Israelites called Jahveh? Had not word been sent to Gaza, attested as true by thousands, that seven mailed mercenaries, one after the other had fallen dead when they attempted to carry away the sacred chest of the Jews? Did not those standing by declare that the poles of the ark which the Jews rested with impunity on their naked shoulders, glowed with a deadly heat, did an uncircumcised man but lay his little finger upon them?

Even the foolhardy Jezrah had been obliged to allow the wonder-working shrine to be carried by its usual bearers, back to its accustomed place in the temple whence it had been hurried in the first terror of flight, when the Jews in Sorek discovered they were no longer a free people. Was he, Abdul, philosopher and worldling, to be forced to deal with such uncomfortable conditions? Was it mere necromancy or could this Samson be really more than a man?

"For this wert thou called from Gaza, to find the way through a mesh of hindrance." Mesech broke into his musing, but with no trace of the taunt that Jezrah could not suppress as he asked:

"Art empty of counsel, thou undoer of kings?"

"Aye, of kings," came the good-natured reply, "but not of magic-working Jews."

Abdul stepped from the shadow of the canopy and began pacing up and down. The two men let their eyes follow him mechanically but their thoughts were busy, each in his own way, with the familiar detail of the problem before them. To Jezrah, it was only a question of riddance once for all of this pest of Jews whose usefulness as tax-payers could in no measure counter-balance the scandal of their pretensions in Sorek.

Jezrah's short, red hair, bleached by long exposure to desert wind and sun, bristled combatively at the very thought of the presence of the Jews in the white-walled town. His bulbous face for all its florid fair-

ness, looked brutish beside the splendid symmetry of Mesech's brow, nose and chin; and the narrow range of the Captain's emotions shrank to simple pettiness before the complex, remotely-derived impulses of his host.

Mesech's Syrian father had given his faculties an inventive, almost commercial turn, while he inherited from his noble Persian mother all the æsthetic, and unmoral tendencies of the fire-worshipping Iranians. And though no hour of his busy day and no dream of his restless nights was free from the memory of the beautiful woman laid for long years in the stone lace-work of her tomb, yet he could calculate effects in time and space consistently and accurately enough to deny his daughter all knowledge of the mother she could not remember and he showed no mercy to the Jews when the question of the amount of the tax arose.

On the whole, during the ten years of his governorship, he had conducted himself as a Philistine should, quite untrammelled by any tenderness for Israel; but of late, he found himself beset by indecision and as the years doubled upon him it seemed he was approaching by spells at least, in his attitude to the unfortunates, the unreckoning days of his early manhood.

And Mesech was ambitious, as well. "Sorek may become Gaza!" Abdul had in a word, matured the hope that lay unacknowledged in the Governor's soul and the torment of his days came full upon him.

Huddled together this night in his dejection, Mesech

still showed a grace of manner and an elegance of line, wanting alike in the princely courtier and the provincial captain. At throat and wrists there gleamed from under a bluish-crimson coat, folds of soft, uncolored silk and trousers of camel's hair were confined by laced boots of tanned kid's skin studded with brilliantly polished metal disks. Both he and Abdul wore the collar and belt of the Philistines: broad and golden, woven of small twisted wires, they were perfectly pliant. A mantle of bleached camel's hair hung from Mesech's shoulders and the happy compromise between the fretted elegance of the court, as given in Abdul's purple and embroidery and the simple dress of the natives of Sorek, bespoke the nice balance of discretion that characterized Mesech in minor affairs.

Jezrah's boots were stayed by slender braces of dull bronze at heel and instep and the tops were hidden by the skirt of a long, leather riding-coat. Coiled around his close-fitting cap of felt were folds of a muslin veil, bound with a cord of twisted silk and gilt so contrived that, at a touch, the cloth could unwreath and cover the face and neck of the wearer with such protection as to baffle clouds of insects or the sand-storms of the desert. There was a charm, at once of grace and expediency about the dress of these men, the well-disposed folds and soft brilliant color of which lent an attractiveness even to the spareness and pallor of Abdul.

He stopped directly in front of Mesech, thrust both

hands into his belt and stared unseeing. A soft, far sound of a woman's voice came to them from below scarcely more audible than the drip, drip of the melted snow as it trickled onto the tabourette and dropped to the floor.

"Where doth this Samson hide his weakness!" Abdul exclaimed. Unconsciously his eyes sought the stately pile on the hill. It looked more like a guarded stronghold than a temple.

"Hath he lust for power, think you, Mesech? In times past, it was not unknown that the leaders of these same stiff-necked Jews who saw advantage to themselves failed not to suit their scruple of custom to the needs of their masters."

Jezrah sprawled on the couch, his eyes fastened on the darkened grove where an occasional flash was all that remained of the brilliant illumination and Mesech sat as if fascinated by the man standing before him. Again the sound of a woman's voice reached them. This time, it was nearer and as clear as a bell-stroke. Each man started as if stung.

"It hath come to me, Mesech!" and Abdul's voice rang with a finality that sent an unaccountable thrill through each of his hearers. "Offer Samson a place in thy household—a post of authority—!"

"A post of authority!" gasped Jezrah.

"A post of authority, carrying with it a good wage and a high repute!"

"Money and power for a priest?" exclaimed Mesech.

"Money and power for a priest! Doth not wine follow—and corruption? Such corruption that shall make his sacred body ready sheath for sword and willing food for poison!" He laid his hands on the shoulder of Mesech who sought to rise. "Give this Hebrew demagogue money and power, Mesech, and he shall be tool of thy craft until we adjudge him forfeit to our patriotism."

"And our several interests in Gaza!" added Jezrah grimly.

"Tis our good fortune to account them as one," and Abdul smiled. "Now turn we to lesser matters—" but Jezrah held up his hand and Mesech sprang toward the stairway. A door had been opened, or a curtain displaced below for a draft of warmer air came up and they heard a light foot-fall and a trail of woman's garments on the steps. Abdul felt impatience and disgust that such interruption had been made possible just at this time, but what his face told of his feeling was lost on the others for a second later, Mesech's daughter stood staring into the half-darkness before her.

CHAPTER III

"Delilah! Daughter!"

"No word, father!" she said, laying the finger-tips of both hands across his lips. "Hast been all evening in the council and yet hast not enough of laying reproach—of giving judgment?"

"I was at rest concerning thee—sure that thou wert deep in slumber!"

"Had my word passed to thee?"

"What fault is in thy foster-mother? Thou art wont to obey Manasseh."

The hands that had slipped caressingly from his lips to his shoulders and clung there, dropped with a swift, passionate protest.

"Shall age wither youth? Shall my waking and my sleeping be timed by a crone's heavy eyelids and a cock's crow?"

"Thou might'st do mischief to thyself! Thou art yet but a child!"

"There thou errest. I am no longer a child!"

From head to foot, Mesech's gaze swept over his daughter.

At this moment of his awakening, it seemed strange to him that he had not realized that with maturity of body there is made an assertion of instinct that requires a flash of knowledge only, to light woman's

wisdom. Though she was as fresh and pure and untried as one of her own blush roses, even he, her father, felt the truth in her words: he could not escape the subtle, insistently feminine something that shone from her eyes and rang in the tones of her voice. Memory evoked the shade of his great, dead passion and his own youth rose before him.

Neither in line nor color nor proportion of Delilah's person was there a trace of her Jewish mother, yet they were so magically alike in their swift appeal of voice and manner. At times, even when a mere child, Mesech had been forced to recognize in his daughter, the extraordinarily nice sense of justice, the acute sympathy and the artistic sensibility that made his wife's short life an unending battle.

A band of embroidered silk brought across Delilah's forehead and fastened behind held in place a white veil which hid her hair entirely and was lost under a short-sleeved, half-fitting mantle of blue. The white stuff that fell over her arms and hid her sandals seemed like cloth-of-silver in the moonlight.

She caught her father's hand and her eyes that shone like stars of lazuli, widened in a sort of consternation when she saw the two men step out of the shadow of the canopy.

Mesech put his arms about her with a new thoughtfulness.

"So may it be, daughter—so may it indeed, be. Thou art no longer a child! This agrees with Jezrah's—"

She caught at her father and held him back.

"Jezrah!"

"—wish concerning thee! Come!"

He led her toward his guests and when they bowed until she could see the backs of their belts, she bent forward ever so little, in a gesture instinct with grace and hauteur.

"The Lord Abdul, my daughter, is lately come from Gaza to inquire into matters concerning the state of Sorek." He turned to Abdul. "She hath known Jezrah from her youth. Greet Jezrah, child."

A faint smile, generally directed, was Delilah's only response and Abdul turned to lift his mantle from the couch.

"Wouldst leave us, Abdul?"

"It remaineth only to give my humble duty to thy daughter and to express hope for more acquaintance. I go to send a messenger speedily to Gaza."

Scarcely had the stranger's back turned when a restraint, maintained with difficulty, fell from the girl.

Jezrah stepped aside under pretence of looping back the ropes of the canopy that trailed under foot.

"All day have I waited to speak with thee, father."

"I was indeed pressed for time, dear one," and he held her close to him.

"Is the state of Sorek so jealous that it alloweth thy daughter no jot of thy day?"

Jezrah stood under the canopy, apprehensive of their want of regard for him, irritated at being placed where

he could not command. "Concern for the helpless—such as thou and all that be beholden to him, driveth thy good father into a press of affairs, not else to be reckoned with." He had meant to be conciliatory but the mixed ugliness of his mood was all too evident in his manner.

Delilah partly raised her head from her father's shoulder and smiling, gave answer. "Thou art become kind, Jezrah!"

The tone was as soft as a kitten's purr but Mesech felt the pliant body grow tense and he motioned the man's silence.

"Is aught amiss, child?"

"Nay, father. What—" She raised her face to his and a flash of troubled vacancy robbed her eyes of expression, to be followed a moment later by a rush of color and a quickening of every line. "Ah! nigh had I forgotten! Wait—" she lowered her voice half in courtesy, half in mockery—"doth Jezrah linger with a purpose? Do we detain him?"

"He doth linger with a purpose indeed, but our time is thine—Jezrah will wait. Speak!"

She kissed him on both cheeks with a swift caress and raised her eager, happy eyes to his.

"A great good hath befallen me, father!"

"Thy fig tree bursts into bloom!"

"Nay—better than that!"

"Thy peahen hath an egg!"

"Nay—greater than this!"

"Ahab hath got thee thy flamingo!"

Delilah shook her head, her face gleaming with delight. "No bloom—nor egg—nor bird!"

"What then? Invention faileth me."

"The gods sendeth—" she hesitated, troubled for a word.

"The gods! What sendeth the gods to thee?"

"Stay thy questioning that I may tell thee!" A frown and a smile passed over her face in quick succession. "There came to the well at noon an old man, calling himself astrologer and he was lame and without bread. Yet he sayeth to Ahab he hath been teacher to princes! When he was fed and rested I talked with him and found he was indeed wise—learned beyond my measuring."

"Ah! Thou hast bespoke him to teach thee?"

"Nay, father. I but bade him wait until thou couldst inquire of him to discover if indeed he be not a great scholar!"

"And if he be?"

"Thou knowest what I have oft-times asked and what thou hast many times promised. I want to learn, father."

He smiled in half pity at her eagerness.

"What is this thing thou wouldst know, my child?"

"To read the books that lie with my mother's jewels in the chest of cedar." Mesech's arm dropped from her and he turned away but she would be heard. "Nay, father, thou wilt listen! The scrolls lure me to spread

them and I open but all is mystery. Even Selma—the little Selma—can read the sense in those signs and markings.” Her tone rose from pleading to reproach. “Shall I, a princess, lack that? Wilt give me a teacher, father?”

“But if this be not a clean man for a maid—”

“There are other schoolmasters in Sorek. Are not many of Selma’s people great scholars?”

“Thou shalt in truth get thy learning, little maid,” Mesech broke in hurriedly, “but I may not say of whom. First, must I speak with this astrologer.”

“Thou wilt not make a new and long delay, father?” she persisted.

“I promise thee thy teacher. Content thee. And now—come Jezrah,” and he held out his hand to the man who hastened toward them. “A greater good hath befallen thee, daughter! Jezrah asks thy hand!”

Delilah turned to the Captain, her voice smothered in consternation.

“Thou?”

“I bring thee—” he began, putting out his hands but she shrank from their nearness. “The cattle on mine hills are as the stars! If thou canst number them—”

She drew a sigh of relief that shook her strained body into relaxation and laughed—a long, low, mirthful laugh.

“’Tis a shepherdess he seeketh—a goatherdess!”

Jezrah choking on her derision, sputtered. “She flouteth a noble offer!”

"Nay," and Delilah's voice was serious, indignant. "But how shalt thou tempt a maiden to marriage, with herds," and she swept out both arms, aping his voice and manner, "with thy 'cattle that are as the stars!'"

All fear was gone from her now. Knowing her desire and her will, there came a feeling of confidence that filled her with a sense of power.

But Jezrah saw only the superb flesh, fatuitously ignoring the value of a heart that shrank farther away from him with every word. He even leaned toward her, leering, exaggerating the stumpy breadth of his body.

"But if their calves be golden!"

"'Twould buy for me—what." She smiled enigmatically, awaiting his answer with interest.

"All things, child." And Mesech came to the rescue of Jezrah's slower wits. "Power, kingdoms—the pomp of the world!"

Delilah's eyes narrowed to a slit.

"All things!" she repeated, sceptically, after a moment. Then she peered at Jezrah, scanning him up and down. "Will it turn thy black locks to bronze, Jezrah?—thy skin to the color of milk? Will it widen thy shoulders and flatten thy paunch? Ah!"

She broke a branch from a bough of balsam and laid it daintily under her nostrils. "Ah—thy herds! They can buy nothing—nothing that is wanting to me, Jezrah!"

She turned and walked from the dazed Captain, who could only gasp:

“Nothing!”

Delilah sent him the compliment of her smile and went onward to the parapet looking down on the quiet streets. “Herds! Bid him spend his golden calves, father. There’s surely market—in Gaza!”

“Hush! Thou angerest a friend of years with foolish talk!”

But Jezrah drew Mesech farther from her, his face darkening with suspicion. “How is it—hair of bronze and skin of milk are in her thoughts? What knoweth she of shoulders—of paunch? Hast led me astray, Mesech?”

As he doubted, as he questioned, Delilah became more alluring to him. He was no libertine but his desire grew at the mere suggestion that this splendid child, as he had thought her, had perhaps already felt the burn of a kiss, the bruise of an embrace—but Mesech’s word carried conviction.

“’Tis childish nonsense, Jezrah. Her innocence hath wrought the dream that grounds this foolish thought. Fret not thyself.” He laid his hand affectionately on the younger man’s shoulder and turned to the girl who still stood at the parapet. Her eyes were fixed on Dagon’s hill: her body swayed unconsciously to the pulsing of the faint music. “We may not press this matter farther tonight, Delilah. I doubt not thy

choice in time will approve my judgment. Good-night, my child."

She turned, smiling on them but not to them. "A goodnight to thee, father."

Again Jezrah strove against the impulse to doubt her: fought the desire to do her some violence—fought and failed for as Mesech stepped into the stairway, he ran swiftly back to the girl and whispered, "I'll seek thee in thy warmer mood!"

But Delilah had no understanding to give effect to his brutality and indeed, she hardly heard the words—her thoughts were busy with the distant market-place.

CHAPTER IV

Delilah stood at the parapet long after the men had gone, wave after wave of faint, pleasurable emotion breaking over her. There was no definiteness either of thought or feeling: only the remedial force of nature was at work repairing the waste of the last hour. All at once, springing from some fountain of consciousness, there came to her an anxiety as to whether the plants had been forgotten. She hurried to the nearest and laid her hand on the earth—it was harsh and dry. She passed quickly from one to the other and found that no water had been given that day. A flash of anger, partly because of the neglect, partly in sympathy with the thirsty things came over her and she reached for the clapper that hung near a brazen gong. But as she lifted the padded mallet, she hesitated—a single stroke would mean a row of slow, sleepy slaves and her rare solitude broken. The poor plants should have their drink early in the morning—but tonight—tonight—she would see no face, not of her own choosing.

She sank down over the parapet and a tinge of self-pity marred the sweetness of her mood. Below her, lying like a flat box, was the khan that a party of revellers from the festival had just entered. A murmur only, from the noisy throng reached her and oc-

casional figures passed in and out of the shaft of light flung from an open door. Servants were busy tending horses and carrying water. Delilah watched the coming and going with interest: never had she seen such cheery bustle at night before. There was something intimate and charming about the simple details of the picture that thrilled this aristocrat and she leaned far over the parapet to watch the gleam of a Scarlet Shawl, taking a pitcher to the well.

When it passed from the firelight into the moonlight it grew a sombre blur and she saw it joined by a greater, darker shadow out in the court. Then came a swift embrace, shunned but not eluded. * * * Delilah watched the stronger arms bear the brimming pitcher back from the well—another kiss and the Scarlet Shawl taking the vessel carried it sedately inside. Then something closed the door, snatching the light away and the girl on the house-top sank back again, sighing, seeing anew her empty, dreary home.

But there was no envy in Delilah's heart for the girl of the Scarlet Shawl. The swift caress aroused in the daughter of Mesech no desire for the touch of lips. No mere stolen kiss or vagrant love tempted her. The unrest that possessed her was a diffused hunger pervading her whole body. Every pulse of her turgid humor, failing sympathy, flooded back upon itself: every atom of her perfect flesh reached out in dumb insistence for perpetuation. Dimly, she felt the perfect sacrifice was ready but nowhere was there altar

for such that she had to give and—who was her god?

As with all true, simple souls, religion and love were one to her. Mesech had kept the women of his household tolerably free from knowledge of the prevalent modes of worship, which were basely corrupted forms of older ethical faiths. Descendants of philosophic, fire-worshipping Persians had fallen from their spiritual heights to the level of the devotees of Asshur whose reverence for the sanctity of the generative impulse in life was expressed by an obscene ritual. Phœnicians, worshippers of Astarte, goddess of the female principle in procreation, invented new modes and complications of orgies, until it was literally true that the Jews alone retained a sense of proportion between the use and the abuse of natural impulse or made even a pretense of clean living as being a part of worship. Of Paganism or of religious practices, there appeared to Delilah a show only of ever-changing deities that failed largely to interest her but she found her curiosity excited and her feelings involved more and more in the teachings of Selma's faith.

There surged in her a protest against her hunger of mind and heart, and a dumb battle against the things and the people immediately surrounding her as if they were the barriers that held in check the impulse to give of her being—to pour out wastefully, irretrievably the self that, grown now to perfection, was fit only to spend—to spend where and for what!

Under this same stress, Salammbo, went to the tent

of Matho and twenty centuries later such women as she took the veil, to feed with symbols or starve out desire—desire that was perhaps too mystical for them to interpret and certainly too strong to be endured.

Delilah was drawn by some unknowable attraction to the temple of Jahveh. The perpendicular, grey walls and the single bluish light gave her a feeling of security as if somewhere, someone possessed something permanent and tangible; yet all the more did she marvel that she should look to this strange, forbidding god. But no peace came of contemplation: she felt baffled, apprehensive and at last arose, stretching her cramped limbs.

A breeze was blowing from the south. Looking about, she sniffed with slight disgust. Then the one moving thing in the prospect caught her eye—a thin spiral of smoke from the burning censer. Crossing swiftly, she gave the tripod a vigorous push that sent it ringing and spinning into the darkness below. This seemed to have saved the moment for her and she was gentle and discriminate in her twining of new vine shoots when Ahab sprang up the steps.

“Thou!”

“ ’Tis nothing, Ahab. I hate the reek of that Egyptian stuff. Send Selma.”

She uncoiled the ropes arranged with such care by Jezrah and with a single jerk sent the canopy into huddled folds, letting in the pale moonlight everywhere. She was aimlessly twisting the cords into hopeless

knots when a little figure glided in, touching her on the arm.

“Dear—Lady!”

“Ah, Selma! Art sleepy?”

“No—” and Selma sighed.

“Wilt sit with me?”

“Willingly,” but there was no animation in tone or look.

“And brush my hair?”

“If the Lady wills.”

“And—tell me strange tales?” At this Delilah bent her bright, speaking face down toward the apathetic, almost sullen one beneath her and her charm drew an honest if faint smile from Selma.

“If perchance—I could interest thee,” she answered.

But Delilah had yet another bait. “Of wonderful Israel and her prophet?” she asked, her eyes fastened on the changing face and she was not cheated of any effect she had planned for her words: Selma was aroused from her depression.

“Dost wish it—dost really wish it?” the girl exclaimed, her whole body a-quiver with pleased excitement. She had been required to do this before, but it had not meant what it did tonight.

Delilah struck the gong and they waited while the sound floated out over the house-top and finally died. Ahab brought a tray loaded with the gentlewoman’s luxurious toilet things, sprinkled white, aromatic powder on a brazier and set out tiny cups of cordial. Then

when they had no more to demand of him he left them as quietly and as quickly as he had come. Still Delilah did not as usual, pillow her head on the girl's lap and demand instant recital. Instead, she dropped to the couch and pulled Selma down beside her.

"Ah, little maid," she sighed presently, "happy art thou who art a slave and yet—have a people: art possessed, a foolish believer in a toy and yet—have a prophet!"

Selma did not answer and with a sigh Delilah slipped down and dragging off her head-dress laid her head in the maid's lap. Her soft, purplish-black hair, flooding Selma's knees, fell to the floor. It clung to the girl's hands and arms with a sort of caress as she drew the comb through the wavy strands—slowly and carefully, but of long habit for her brain was whirling and her heart was burning. Did Delilah know? Did she indeed care for Israel?

"Is not Philistia a great nation?" Selma at length ventured for fear of shrieking out her real thought.

Delilah stayed her hand and looked up at the questioner; her eyes which glittered in the moonlight were as scornful as her tones.

"Philistia! What is Philistia, Selma! A land of fathers that give their daughters as pledge, that sell their sons! One year, Philistines are Phœnicians—Egyptians! The next, Syrians and Persians! Shifting," and she gesticulated vividly, "shifting with their petty, fickle purposes!"

She dropped her hands over her eyes and pressed hard to keep back the tears of an inexplicable excitement. She was not wont to concern herself with state affairs, but certain happenings in her childhood at Gaza had become illumined by the light of recent acts and it all took on the aspect of a personal grievance. Who was responsible for the bitterness and unrest in Sorek that even she, isolated as she was, had felt? Youth allows compromise with rectitude no less in public than in private affairs and the political juggling in which her father took part, hurt her as would a personal wrong.

"But the god of thy—?"

"Which?" And Delilah, rising quickly, turned to Selma bitterly. "Syrian, Egyptian or Babylonish? See yonder light!" She laid an arm about Selma's shoulder and twisting her about, pointed to the grove where a faint, diffused glow marked a certain progress in the ceremony. "Tonight, it is for Dagon. Tomorrow, the doves and the oil and the wine will be laid before—which? Astarte or Baal?" She smiled contemptuously, shaking her head. "Not even thy prophet can tell."

But Selma answered reverently. "If Jahveh wills he telleth."

"Thy priest, too, worketh signs and wonders?"

"Nay—'tis the cherubim on the ark."

Something in Selma's complacent assurance hurt Delilah and she struck back, half maliciously, half in jest to hide her own emotion.

“And these same cherubim, my Sweet, were brought out of Egypt—cruel, iniquitous Egypt!” But Selma’s tearful eyes restored Delilah’s goodness of heart, not long to be suppressed, and she sighed in frank dilemma. “Yet—it stirreth something within me—this thought of thy people, nomads and fanatics—and—of thy leaders, who are both judge and priest!”

Selma sat, battling with the desire to tell what she knew. The wish for recognized equality with Delilah and the longing to enlist her mistress’ legitimate sympathy for the Jews, was tainted by a desire to shock this proud creature; to secure a kind of revenge; to ease a bitterness that pervaded her—a bitterness, engendered by revolt against Delilah’s use of her, all the more galling that it was always so indulgent, displaying in this very quality the actual superiority that alone begets the finest sense of obligation. Selma set her small teeth in the red of her lips to bite back the words that threatened to force a way between them.

The moments passed and Delilah’s tears were dried by the stirring thoughts that possessed her: the picture of the Jews, slaving in the quarries of Egypt, their hands concerned with basest labor but their minds filled with high intent, their hearts inspired by duty and devotion. This presented to Delilah a field for musing that was never exhausted. She felt her cheeks suddenly aflame with shame at the thought that the children of those courageous, noble souls are here in Sorek,

among heedless, ignorant Philistines, dispossessed and despised! The tragedy of it thrilled her with a rare emotion.

"Some uncommon interest in the matter layeth hold upon me," she said aloud after awhile, as if in explanation of her silence. "Perhaps—perhaps—some good thing came out of Egypt!"

They sat quiet for a time. So quiet that a night-singing bird alighted on a myrtle tree near them and poured out his mating-song to a little creature that fluttered about him. When the bird had ended—when he had gained his bride and they darted away in amorous flight, Delilah sighed again as if she had held her breath as long as the bird's song lasted and smiling brilliantly lay back upon the couch, lifting Selma's hand with the comb to her hair.

"And Samson—this wonderful priest of thine—is he bent and old as are the Levites of the ark?"

"Nay—he is young: wide of shoulder, narrow of hip and as straight as a pillar of the Temple."

"And he is King as well as Prophet?" Delilah asked when the comb had gone back and forth many times down the long length of her hair.

"The Prophet is King!"

"So—" Delilah smiled indulgently, "he weareth a purple robe and a breast-plate of jewels!"

"If there be occasion in the Temple. But for the most, he weareth only a fair linen tunic and sandals of straw."

Delilah jumped up so suddenly that the comb, jerking from Selma's hand flew far astray.

"A fair linen—*thy Prophet* weareth a fair linen tunic and sandals of straw?"

Selma's face glowed with a rare enthusiasm. "Aye—they match him better than—"

But Delilah was on her knees before the girl. "His hair! Tell me, Selma—is it bronze—bright as the sun at noon?"

"True! Shining bronze! No one hath such hair!"

But Delilah hurried her on. "Ah, yes—I know! And his eyes—tell me of his eyes! Are they blue—blue as the heavens?"

Selma nodded gayly. "Blue as thy mantle."

"But Selma—list thee. When we stole out, thou and I—dost mind the day that we hid from Manasseh and crept out into the streets to watch the pageant—the camels and the chariots that bore the Lords of Gaza through the province—did he stand—in his fair linen tunic and sandals of straw—apart—"

"Even he—on the steps of the market!"

"Selma!" Delilah spoke slowly, her voice low and vibrant with emotion. "Selma! Why hast thou not told me this was Samson, Judge of Israel!"

"Didst thou not seize my arm, bidding me not stir nor speak? Nigh had I pointed him out to thee—"

"I feared to waken: I thought 'twas a dream that a man could be so."

Delilah dropped back, away from the girl and closed

her eyes. At last, the aimless currents of her being had been given direction. To name a thing is to call it into existence. The vision of the man in the market-place had, up to this time, remained only a picture to her; stimulating every humor but arousing no definite emotion, no distinct idea. She had not so far willed. Now, all waste of energy was past: the words of Selma had set the aspiration of a woman's soul in expression and neither might nor power could prevent its attaining the height toward which it soared. All this Delilah could not yet realize but she knew that her hour had come, at last. Its potentiality had always been with her: now, its necessity was upon her. Samson, in an instant became real to her and she was avid for knowledge of him. She leaned once more toward the girl.

"And his voice! Doth he speak with thee, Selma? What of his voice?"

"'Tis strong and tender," and Selma grew eloquent in praise. "It ringeth like a tempest in rebuke but can charm—"

Delilah shrank from the words in prescience of what was to come. "Yes—hush—I know what it shall do when—"

She sat staring, wrapped in her thoughts. * * *

"Ah—when shall he speak to me!"

"If thou wert of his people—" Selma hazarded timidly but Delilah sprang at her.

"If! There is no if in this matter. Listen Selma—by the heart a woman knoweth. He hath not seen me,

but he will! I have not heard his voice, but I shall!"

Her words though low and controlled, rang in virtual prophecy to herself as well as to Selma.

"Darest go to the Temple? He comes not to a Philistine—" Selma would have said "woman" but suddenly recalling what it shocked her to think that she could have forgotten for a moment, added: "house."

Delilah unheeding, had arisen and threw a puzzled, alert look here and there, then she turned to Selma.

"Didst note how the wind lifted his tresses that calm day when no breeze stirred—didst note it, my Selma?"

"'Twas the movement of the beasts that pulsed the air!"

"Nay." Delilah pointed to the folded canopy. "What is this now!" A current of hot air swept up from below, lifting the silken ornaments of the curtain, growing each moment warmer and stronger. "See, the tassels sway! The same spirit pervadeth the air, Selma! It speaks to me—he is coming!"

A dull glow, growing with the seconds lighted her pallid face and she stood with suspended breath, head up—eyes closed as one who sees and feels beyond human ken.

"Thou dreamest!" Selma fell back afraid.

"Nay. I awake from sleep," said Delilah smiling, not questioning the cause of the red light that made the moonlight a darkness.

"Thou art beside thyself!"

"Yea, I am with him." She stood tense and expectant.

At that instant, a great noise broke out from below mingled with cries of: "Fire! "Fire!" "Ladders!" "Succor!" "The khan is ablaze!" Smoke and sparks flew around them, terrifying the one.

"The khan—" Selma shrieked, uncomprehending.

"Is in flames," Delilah added calmly.

"I fear—oh—I fear!"

Delilah smiled enigmatically. "I wake."

Again there was shouting and the glow burst into a billow of flame.

Selma caught at Delilah attempting to drag her to the stairway. "Come—come! I sicken with fear."

Delilah pushed the clinging hands away. "Go to those below. I want thee not here."

She led the trembling girl to the stairway. Alone, she stood with every trace of excitement gone and so surely was she prepared for what came to her that she shrank ever so little only, when a man, speeding by the stumbling Selma dashed to the canopy and began tugging at the ropes. They would not yield and he looked around for some possible tool. Then he saw the woman standing near him.

"Lend thy hand," he said.

With a single spring Delilah was beside him and together they pulled at the stubborn knots.

"The gateway of the khan is choked in smoke and flames. Children, women—the beasts—all within must

be taken out over the roof," he explained as he untied and unwound.

"Is there danger to thee?" But the rope was freed and without answer, he fastened it to the marble post at the head of the stairs and pulled a knife from his belt.

"Thy hand!"

Delilah gave it to him and he held it a moment unconscious of his delay, while the fire-lit smoke swept over them.

"Lay it here." He touched a particular turn of the strand. "When the flax quivers—so," he drew the rope taut, then let it jerk in her grasp, "cut—quickly—dost understand?"

"Yes," she breathed, her eyes held by his.

He tested the rope again and ran to the parapet but Delilah followed him, unhooking her mantle.

"Thy linen tunic—is as tow, if the flames but touch it. Take—I pray thee—this;" throwing her mantle about him, "'tis heavy with dew."

Delilah sprang back to her task and when the signaling jerk came made a stroke with the knife. The rope did not part and she cut again. Still the flax would not sever and with a groan she sank over the rope sawing it in two. The free end, springing into the air as if it were alive, fell—slid rapidly across the floor and Delilah was beside it when it jerked over the parapet.

Samson had disappeared into what seemed to her,

at first sight, to be a world of smoke broken by one terrifying burst of fire. But, the next moment she saw that the central court of the khan was yet in complete darkness: that the veering funnel of flame was pouring from the great gateway and that the people in the streets were running about shouting frantically.

One thing only moved in the haze that thickened and thinned on the roof of the khan and Delilah leaned far over the parapet, straining to keep in sight the one man in Sorek who was not dismayed by the wrath of the fire-fiend.

Was he himself a god, she questioned, raising her head for a moment to look above the murky, ominous pall, to the temple on the cliff where the single, blue light burned? Was he a god, to pass through fire unhurt?

When she looked below again, there was no one on the khan's roof though her excited gaze, pointed by apprehension, pierced the thickening smoke. The people in the streets were huddled together in groups—silent—expectant—of what? Something seemed to be moving under the west wall but Delilah could not determine what it was. Her heart seemed to stand still in an agony of fear for the man who was lost to her sight.

"If he be, himself, no god—is Jahveh of Israel keeping guard over its priest, this night?" she moaned with her eyes toward the temple as one who prays.

At that instant, there was a crash—millions of

sparks showered around her, the flames shot up from every side and from the hitherto palsied mob there arose a shout, a mighty cheering. The silence that ensued and a second chorus of cries that reached Delilah meant to her only what desire or dread would interpret. The wind that had begun to blow from the north was massing the smoke above the khan, against her father's house and had by this time shut from sight everything below her but the forked flames and the fringes of the rabble.

Again there was that terrified silence—again the frenzied shouts and Delilah, torn by alternate passions of hope and despair, sank down over the parapet, her eyes fixed now on the forbidding pall below her, now on the light in the temple of Jahveh, that no cloud from the conflagration rose high enough to obscure.

BOOK II

THE TREE IN THE GARDEN

CHAPTER I

Ahab had taken the small metal cups from Mesech and his guests and though he was still busy at a table behind them, Jezrah could restrain himself no longer.

“What cause is there—”

But Mesech laid a hand on his knee. “Thy pardon, Jezrah, but all servants are spies and this one, methinks, lingereth overlong with his task.”

Mesech was pale and except that the boots of the evening before were replaced by scarlet, leather slippers and a narrow band of silver filagree to confine his full trousers at the ankles, it was evident that he had neither changed his clothes nor slept. At that instant Ahab disappeared and Mesech motioned Jezrah to speak.

“What cause is there to suspect that this astrologer is a spy from Assyria?” Jezrah then demanded.

“That he should be old and lame and houseless and yet have been teacher to princes is a strange concurrence. Is it not so, Abdul?” Abdul nodded and

Mesech went on. "At first mention of these different conditions the thought that he came not innocently entered my mind, but other matters overlay it until after the danger of the khan was past. Then I saw this astrologer in talk with Samson and as it seems fit in these troubled times, I held them both for question."

"Didst come upon aught?"

"Nay. Even with much questioning and assumption of knowledge nothing appeared that could weight a charge that Samson had aught of interest in the stranger or even of acquaintance with him until the accident of the burning khan had brought them together."

"Then why dost still suspect this astrologer to be a bearer of communication between the Jews and Assyria?" And Jezrah's impatience struck some spirit into Mesech's dreary mood, depressed as he was by his own inward conflict and the physical wear of the long night.

"Albeit I offered him freely lodgment under my roof, he left my house speedily—and, mark thee—with no limp in his gait."

"Also he showed pieces of silver at the north gate wherewith to buy a beast," drawled Abdul, whose consciousness of fatigue caused him to appear elaborately self-contained and to have taken almost foppish care with his morning toilet. His servant waited without for him with a sunshade, matching the color of his

violet coat. He flicked an invisible speck from his spotless trousers as he continued blandly.

"Yesterday he was old and poor and made feint to be schoolmaster to maidens that he might have honest bread!"

Jezrah, turbanless, his coat stained with charred wood, water and mud, irritated alike by Abdul's composure and his clothes, turned to Mesech peevishly. "And Samson—is he likewise fled?"

"Nay. He remaineth."

"Ha! They scent his tracks—the Jewish dogs! At daybreak, there came to my gate a shambling, motley crew, demanding his person—saying he is wrongfully withheld!"

"Thou knewest nothing. Thou gavest them fair words?"

"In following up of thy intention, I pledged them he should be found. Bah! It sickeneth me! Wilt hold him, Mesech—wilt dare the Jewish dogs?"

Mesech was staring before him, apparently unmindful of the question and Abdul gave answer.

"Nay, Jezrah. The advent of this spy has taken the simple straightness out of the matter. It may follow that there is no choice but to reckon with Assyria and that speedily."

They fell into silence and Jezrah walked out into the court, perhaps to signify his disgust at the turn the talk had taken.

"All the more need to entice and betray this Sam-

son," Abdul continued. "Hast thought of a wardenship or such place for him, Mesech?"

"I am not at loss for means to employ him."

"He is doubtless a scribe."

"The records and accounts due at Gaza are in want of one versed in figuring and arrangement. 'Tis no light task."

Here Jezrah who had not gone so far as to be entirely out of ear-shot strolled back to them.

"And thy daughter," he suggested, with just a trace of a sneer, "is balked of her desire of a teacher since the astrologer is turned spy. Perhaps it might hasten and insure thy end didst thou offer Samson a double honor!"

"A double honor!" And Mesech was unable or unwilling to understand, but Abdul caught at the idea, surprised at Jezrah's craft.

"Of scribe to thee and—schoolmaster to the Lady Delilah," he explained.

Mesech, sorely beset, sank back into his chair, feeling again the toils that were tightening around him. Would he never be able to escape the necessity of persecuting these Jews, whom he fain would protect? And yet, now as before, when the question of the tax had arisen, he found his anger hot against them that they were the cause of so much worry to him. He even hated them, at times, because they reminded him of an obligation higher than statesmanship and because they would not let him forget that

he was something more to them than the Governor of Sorek.

Yet there was in him that which had made him Governor of Sorek, master of the Jews, and as before, he felt his irritation grow and he knew that, driven by a desire to have done with his own misgiving—to escape from the painful temptation of being understanding and merciful, where it would seem he ought only to be blind and unfeeling—he would resort to some swiftly chosen, perhaps brutal course of action. For a moment he became desperately reconciled to his own recklessness, glad even for a second to have decided upon something—he looked up at Jezrah who stood before him.

“It weareth late,” Jezrah reminded him, “and at noon I answer the Jews. ’Tis needful then to use honeyed words—to say that Samson is free from bonds, is a guest in the house of Mesech? I would be quit of the affair. ’Tis no dealing to my liking.”

“’Tis safest.” Mesech had recovered again both in voice and in manner, his official dignity. “If Samson be indeed a serpent, Jezrah, he will lift his head to strike. Then shalt thou smite—high and low!” He sighed and looked out into the sun-lit court, envying the careless birds that flew among the flowers. “For the present give the Jews assurance of their priest’s safety.”

“If it please thee, Mesech, we bear Jezrah company to the court,” and Abdul assisted the elder man to rise

as Ahab entered the room with his arms full of garlands.

“Has the Lady Delilah yet arisen?” Mesech asked as the servant stood deferentially to let them pass.

“She went but now to feed the beasts.” And when they had gone, Ahab chuckled with some irrepressible merriment. Then he laid his fragrant burden on the floor and began wreathing the pillars with springy ropes of balsam, jasmine and rose.

CHAPTER II

The apartment was the audience room of Mesech's palace and it opened by high rectangular portals into the main court. The uncompromising lintels and supports were draped by curtains, of rich green, looped back so that the sunshine streamed in and one could see out under the open sky where doves circled around a fountain and stately peacocks wound in and out among the Persian roses.

The apartment had but one set of windows and this was above the great audience chair—overlaid with beaten gold—that stood on the platform, raised seven shallow steps from the tessellated marble floor. A divan covered with cloth of rich embroidery ran obliquely through the room and the air was kept cool and fragrant by the porous jars of perfumed water, suspended from the ceiling by chains. At each square pillar stood a tub of pink, crêpe myrtle and everywhere the original severity of the room was disguised and softened by garland, or curtain or exquisite grill-work of bronze.

Ahab fastened the festoons to staples, set in the interstices of the stones and his mind was as busy as his hands. To him the Lady Delilah was a riddle pleasant to puzzle over. When a lad, he had been taken

by Mesech at the famous battle of Kirbar, and had chosen to remain with his Philistine master, even after freedom had been granted to him. This was the year before his master's marriage, and there were times immediately following the death of Mesech's wife when Ahab and Manasseh had for months the care of Delilah, the revenues of the estate and of the house; but no amount of intimacy could ever make Ahab feel even comfortably familiar with the imperious child. Matured early in life, according to the smaller plan of his nature, he could not understand the long, slow development of his mistress: always calculating, he could not comprehend her disinterestedness.

He marveled how devotedly she nursed a wind-broken rose-bush until the plant was again thrifty—able to compete for its share of food and to contend against the sun. Then, for all of Delilah's effort the bush might die, so little concern had she in the self-sufficient thing.

Ahab had seen her pour pure water with her own high-bred hands into the sores of a beggar whom the lowest slave had scorned to touch; had seen her spread the healing salve and herself bind up the pitted flesh. True, she had stripped herself of every garment—had had them burned and had purified herself with many lavings of water when her tendance of the sick was past—but, why did she scorn this same beggar, when sleek and sound, he sought her out and tried to kiss her feet?

She had thrown him money and turned from him with disgust. Were the sores of a half-unconscious wretch sweeter to her than the worshipful gratitude of the sane, comely man? Thus Ahab questioned and no more could he understand her apparent scorn of Jezrah, whose fabulous wealth and reckless daring were the pride and wonder of Sorek.

As he wound the last garland around the pillar, he thought of the catastrophe of the night before, which Delilah soon must know; and though he chuckled, he would gladly have escaped his share of responsibility for the fault. But the reckoning was not long to be avoided for a door at the far end of the room flew open and Delilah appeared, dragging an unwilling leopard cub with one hand and the weeping Selma with the other. Coming up to Ahab she stopped, trembling and pale with anger.

"Tell me, Ahab—how is it my Namur has blood on his feet and is bound as to his jaws—so?" She jerked the beast toward the servant. "This maid can only whimper!"

"She is choked on thy displeasure, Lady, even as my throat is dry—"

"Cease thy chatter!" She loosed hold on Selma who, sinking to the floor buried her face in her lap. The animal still stood braced against the pull on his collar. "See"—and Delilah pointed to the bloody muzzle, "see the pitiable beast! Have I not myself bedded and fed him—not with the flesh of his kind—

ah—never,” here her voice sank to a plaint, “but always with milk and honey and barley-cake! What reward shall such pains bring me if, when I sleep, my false friends—” here Selma lifted her head—“let him gorge on bloody offal!”

She worked at the muzzle to get it off and Ahab stood with his head hanging but Selma stung by the “false friends” spoke out.

“What think you of the muzzle, if one arranged his disobedience?”

“Perhaps to save thy own meat!” Delilah flashed back. “Now that thou hast found thy tongue, Dumb One, canst tell, maybe, why Namur is corrupted and then punished with this brazen basket!”

The muzzle at that instant fell into her hands and she sent it spinning across the floor. Selma motioned dumbly to Ahab and then dropped her head into her lap again.

“He is only a beast, good mistress—of his kind. It is no fault in him that he craveth flesh. Last night, aroused by the tumult and the flames, a knowledge of his strength came to him and—”

“Last night!”

“As the khan burned!”

“Last night a knowledge of his strength came to him!” Delilah repeated, breathlessly. “What befell then, Ahab?”

“Namur broke his bonds!”

Delilah’s grip on the leopard’s collar relaxed and

she stepped nearer the man, pallid—but not with anger now—questioning her own destiny.

“What doeth a beast when he breaketh bonds, Ahab?”

Ahab raised his shoulders, expressively. “Namur is full. He hath fed for the first time in his life, but—there are no brooding doves this morning.”

A gong, soft and deep sounded through the house and the servant hurried away. Delilah loosed hold of the cub and he sank in a heap, his head between his paws. Presently, Delilah too, slipped down beside Selma and laid her free hand upon the leopard’s head. Thus they sat and the beast snored, unconscious alike of his sated thirst for blood and his accomplished mission. Minute by minute went by, and Selma stealing a look at her mistress could make nothing of the quiet mien and the great, staring eyes. Presently, Delilah spoke:

“Didst know, Selma,” and her voice was low and tremulous with tears, “that I, too, am a dreamer? I took this little, helpless beast and sought to make his heart as gentle as his body was tender. But—look you, sister,” and she pulled the girl’s face up close to her own, scanning it anxiously—questioning experience, thirsting for sympathy, “even that silken fur cried out for flesh!”

She came near to weeping but forcing back the sobs, with a smile turned to the leopard. “So you ate my brooding doves!” Her voice broke at the words and

she sat with her hands clasped in her lap while the hot tears splashed over them.

"Hunger is terrible—flesh-hunger!" Selma gently interposed.

"Flesh-hunger! Hast ever felt hunger, Selma?"

"Not hunger of the body, such as this beast's—women feel no such, but—" Delilah looked up, the tears drying on her lashes, "there is an hunger that meat will not still—hunger of the heart—," the other grasped her convulsively.

"Hush, child!"

When, after a while, Ahab came with fresh water for the jars, Delilah pushed the maid away from her and rising in her old imperious fashion called to him: "Take this pitiable beast! Feed him to his satisfaction according to his like!" The man stared, recognizing her father's trait of sudden, passionate decision. "Let him gorge meat," she went on. "Let him drink blood, if he will! Dost hear? Bid Manasseh prepare the bath!"

When he had gone, Delilah began walking up and down between the muzzle that lay in a far corner and the steps leading to the audience chair with vigorous, unhurried tread, while the color came back to her face. Once she stopped and smiled at Selma. "So—we feed us with doves, if they offer us sop of honey and barley-cake," she said, but Selma stared only, feeling again the thrill—half of fear, half of pleasure that possessed her when Ahab laid hands upon her, the night before.

The beam of light from the east window shrank in its length across the floor and the roses in the garden drooped with the heat of the coming noon. When Delilah stopped before Selma again, she was serious and the pallor of suppressed excitement marked her.

"Why should I, Selma, fashioned likewise of clay—strive against my flesh?"

Selma, sensitive to the magnetic influence of the woman near her, questioned again her own unresponsiveness the night before, but she was mystified only, when Delilah repeated slowly: "In the tumult and the flames a knowledge of his strength came to Namur!" Then, after a moment, "To him who is beast * * * and— * * * to me, who am woman!"

She stood, her eyes fixed on the spot where the animal had lain.

"Ah! Namur—Namur—thou art teacher indeed!" She stooped and lifted Selma to her feet. "Didst here, Selma, that—aroused by the tumult and the flames a knowledge of his strength came to Namur and he broke his bonds?" She shook the girl gently. "Have not the thongs cut thee, my Selma? See!" She held out both wrists. "I am rid of them!" Then she smiled on the now wholly bewildered girl, a smile that declared the accumulated force of her long adolescence with its burden of primitive resource, courage and passion.

"Now for the flesh-pots, little one—thou and I!" she cried jubilantly. "We will eat daintily, but to our

fill, as mortals whose roots are in the earth—else—”

Selma, swayed again, by she knew not what impulse, breathed: “Else—?”

But Delilah perceiving Manasseh, who entered with the slaves bearing the girls’ clothing and the appointments for the bath, whispered: “Else—we devour brooding doves in the night!”

CHAPTER III

Try as he might, Mesech was unable to decide what he could do or even what he wished to do with the problem before him. The Governor's lists and reports were in a serious state of confusion, due as much to the incompetency as to the dishonesty of the Syrian steward. For this reason, the suggestion of Samson's becoming his secretary held a certain promise of expediency. Yet he dreaded the comment to which this action would give place on all sides: its awkwardness when it came to explanations; and not the least of his objections to employing Samson with an ambiguous purpose, was the treachery inherent in such conduct.

He tried at times to reason himself into believing that the conditions of affairs in the state demanded this especial sacrifice of scruple on his part; but all the while this attempt at evasion was being made, Mesech felt in his heart that Samson himself was guiltless, even of misdemeanor: that the Jews were, for the most part, law-abiding, and that the cause for the present unrest lay in the greed and envy of Assyria, that sought to tempt the relatively few malcontents.

Abdul was for instant action of some sort in the matter of retaining the mastery of Israel and when he offered to take the direction of affairs at the interview,

which should lay the first mesh in the toils about Samson, Mesech was conscious of no small relief. He saw no immediate need of willing, on his own part: he felt he would be carried on by a current of events and all that he could bring himself to do was to decide to keep the matter well within his own hand that he might be in a position to arrest the course of any drastic measures that might be set in motion by Abdul.

Samson, proudly patient of his durance, had been led into the presence of the Governor, who occupied the golden chair with Abdul at his right. The two soldiers guarding the prisoner, eyed envyingly the splendid body and the regal bearing of their charge.

"It rejoiceth us, Samson," Abdul began, "that thou art acquitted of the matters charged against thee—inciting to insurrection, carrying of weapons—"

"If it please your grace, how am I acquitted? I have not yet testified of act or intent."

"Tut, man! Let those that make charges concerning thee, prove thy guilt! We are greatly in debt to thee for the risk of thy life, yesternight. Thou art risen in popular favor! Mine ears still ring with the shouts that rose when they saw thee drop into the smoke-wreathed darkness! Not only men and women but beasts and bales of goods didst thou save for us, lifting down with care or tossing over the wall as was fit. Through thee alone, naught was burned save filth and the wagons that blocked the beasts' gate. 'Tis

deserving of reward. Mesech hath somewhat to say to thee."

"In so doing, I kept the law, only. For such, no reward is asked nor can be taken."

Mesech slipped to the edge of his chair and sat there uneasily, buffeted by memory, recognizing the indomitable pride he had reckoned with so often in the past: glorying in that trait of Jewish character, too, as one of the smaller justifications of his marriage, yet was he none the less irritated. He caught at what had seemed needless effort on Samson's part the night before, breaking the silence that was plainly embarrassing to all but the prisoner.

"Is thy law so nice that it bids thee, when crackling timbers heave and hot stones burst, to risk thy body, even yet? Did'st think of thy law when two old women, weighting thee, refused to be handed to those below, and clung to thee until thou hadst carried them beyond the falling of the brands, even? Is this commanded of thy law?"

"Aye, for the stranger that is within thy gates."

The tone was low and respectful but without a hint of servility. Mesech exchanged glances with Abdul.

"A golden vessel for thy temple!" the latter exclaimed quickly.

The answer flashed back instantly. "The altar is furnished according to the law!"

Just the flicker of a smile flashed over Abdul's face as Mesech motioned the soldiers to retire. In spite of

his disgust at the amount of contrivance it seemed to require to accomplish such simple ends, Abdul found himself amused at the interesting scruples, the prejudice and the superstition of these provincials. If Sorek were Gaza, Samson would be done for as soon as he could be dragged into a dungeon and a cohort of good soldiers would settle the unwarlike Jews. But Gaza was a bankrupt city exhausted by centuries of extravagance; helpless now because of two generations of men who could produce nothing, and Sorek was rich and willing to pay.

Perhaps, too, Abdul suspected there might be some relation between prosperity and freedom—between obedience and mercy for he was moved to hand Samson over to Mesech with a single gesture, as he walked away from them.

“Art a scribe, Samson?” Mesech asked almost gently, softened by the youth and noble beauty before him.

“I was taught of the Levites,” Samson answered simply.

Mesech twisted uncomfortably in his chair and waited until Abdul had gone yet farther out into the court.

“I know not what thy law requireth as touching gentler missions, but I have need of one versed in accounting. With the gold of the tax, there goeth yearly to Gaza certain accounts and reckonings, made true to the fact that check each other. Our steward

hath proved himself no man for the work—other matters forbid me time. Wilt undertake the task? Wilt be scribe to me, Samson?"

"I am ordained as teacher, not as keeper of accounts."

"'Tis no bond-task. 'Tis paid with pieces of gold!"

"Gold may not change priest to clerk."

There was not the least trace of impertinence or of self-righteousness in Samson's stubborn refusals but they piqued Mesech to a desire to discover if there might not be some ordinarily vulnerable humanity behind all this seeming of polite incorruptibility.

There was left the suggestion of Jezrah and after thinking it over, although it had appeared so distasteful at first, it did not seem the least dangerous or even unusual that the Jewish priest should be schoolmaster to his daughter. In spite of the social ostracism of Samson's people, the most conservative men of Sorek did not scorn to listen to the sermons of learned Jews and the proud nobles of Gaza, exiled on duty to Sorek, took advantage of the school for children in the temple of Jahveh, that their families might not be brought up in ignorance.

"I take it thou wouldst favor me, Samson," Mesech said after a pause, "if I bespoke thee of somewhat that lay within thy power."

Samson was mechanically counting the square pillars before him, perhaps half unconsciously working against the anxiety he felt over the commotion his long absence from the temple must provoke.

"I am wholly thy servant, in such ways as are permitted to me," he said coldly, when he had counted quite to the end of the row, again.

"In such case, I have yet another thing to ask of thee."

Mesech searched the passive face before him, but found the beginning no easier for any invitation or response there. He looked appealingly out to Abdul but the envoy was amusing himself with an amorous peacock that shook its magnificent tail-feathers with a sound as if an hundred tiny castenets were in motion. So still was the noon air that this faint whirring reached the two in the audience room, and the splash of the fountain seemed unnaturally distinct. Mesech laid aside his hesitancy, forcing himself to forget for a moment his treachery and his solicitous voice rang strangely true.

"'Tis an unusual case, Samson, and 'twould be taken as a favor from thee to me. My daughter—the Lady Delilah—"

Samson started.

"Hast seen her?"

"Nay."

But Mesech knitted his brows in an effort to recollect. "How came you by her mantle? Dost remember an heavy robe that spared those passing through the flames?"

For the moment, Samson's self-control was broken and he appeared fatigued and bewildered.

"There was such a mantle," he answered after a moment.

"How came you by it?"

"I—I have no memory. I caught it up, as I ran, perhaps—" He looked about confused, struggling to realize what presentiment tormented him, and his eye fell on the long, blue veil that lay beside the door Delilah had entered with the leopard. Then Samson knew and his face cleared.

"There was a maid on the roof. I mind she gave it me."

"The Lady Delilah. 'Tis she that hath the wish to learn. Wilt dwell in my house? Wilt be schoolmaster to my daughter, Samson?"

"I may not. Am servant to the Temple."

"Thou couldst come and go. Maidens are not over-diligent."

"'Tis no question of time. I am much beholden to thee, but I have no part in a Philistine house. There are learned ones of her people who can teach the Lady Delilah."

"Not to her liking. She hath a whim for poetry, for the songs of thy people."

Quite innocently, Mesech had touched on a spot, sore to all Israel. Many of the idle aristocrats in Sorek were studying as a passing whim—as a thing stimulating because of its impropriety—the sacred songs of Israel. Libertines and courtesans sang the holy Hebrew canticles, interpreting the rich, tropical

figures in the light of their degenerate imaginations. To the older, more prejudiced Jews this was a most hateful form of persecution, but Samson, idealistic and naturally indifferent to the actions of people with whom he was not concerned, had rather pitied the perverts and now, felt only a slight resentment toward the girl who knew so little as to be willing to debase things sacred. But the ends of justice must be served: he could not deny her his school.

"Let her come to the Temple with the Jewish maidens," he answered.

Mesech, balanced on the pivot of his physical exhaustion, flew into sudden anger, as swift as it was unreasoning. "Abide thou!" he shouted and motioning Abdul, took him by the arm and left the apartment, signaling the soldiers to stand guard at the doors.

CHAPTER IV

In Samson's ancestry, there was not one drop of the Egyptian blood that was plainly to be seen in many of the Jews in Sorek. Moreover, the noble dignity of his bearing, together with his unsuspecting attitude toward all men, showed that no fathers of his had served in bondage along the Nile. This was true because Samson was not native to Sorek but had been born of Chaldean parents who were journeying to their kinsmen in the west.

Of the sons of Terah, Abraham, impelled by the innate vagrancy of those who shall wander and redeem the earth, journeyed westward and Ur of the Chaldees knew him no more even by report, for generations. Nahor, the younger brother, lover of the soil, content with his lot, died where he was born and his sons kept for centuries their traditions and their blood pure until hardier, whiter races from the north came down upon them. Then it happened that the simple, pastoral Jahvehists were no match for the enemy who coveted their fertile valley and Ur of the Chaldees became Erech of Babylonia, hostile to the descendants of the man who had made its glory.

There was current among the Chaldean Jews, for a long time, a legend, derived from an unknown source,

of a Paradise in the west; and when merchant and mendicant brought oft-repeated report of the prosperity of the Abrahamic Jews in Sorek, the hearts of the wretched children of Nahor turned toward the plain beyond the desert as the land promised them of old. So it was that Melkah and his bride joined a caravan journeying westward from Erech and after many weeks of suffering, the heart-sick father stood at the eastern gate of Sorek with his first-born in his arms. The young mother was lying in the sand behind him.

Melkah did not question when a procession of priests and Levites appeared and took the child from him; and the Jews of Sorek seemed as little concerned when the fever-smitten man died three days later in the courtyard of the khan. They had to do only with the infant that had been so miraculously sent to them and the instructions concerning his bringing-up were as definite and adequate as the announcement of the time and place of his birth had been.

There had appeared seven days before the arrival of the caravan, a holy man from out the desert proclaiming that Jahveh had begun the fulfillment of his covenant with Israel, in the person of a babe who should be born in the desert and who should be brought up by Manoah and his childless wife.

Mysterious fire played about the cherubim and voices were heard from the ark when it was announced that a caravan had come in from the East and the wife of

Manoah, awed by the mystery, her heart aching with pure joy, walked at the head of the procession to receive the expected child.

The rite of circumcision, practised in a desultory fashion by the Chaldean Jews, was administered to the infant and they named him Samson, child of the sun, in token that he came out of the East; or perhaps, in spite of their instinct for monotheism, even the orthodox Jews of Sorek could not escape the influence of the pagan beliefs and observances that met them at every turn.

Until the disaster to Hebrew interests in Sorek which came in Samson's sixteenth year, the boy was taught and trained and guarded with most scrupulous care. With the wisdom caught from the example of their neighbors, the son of Melkah had been exercised by the Levites equally well in body as in mind, so that his superb development, along with his fair hair and white skin doubtless gave rise to the wide-spread report of his possessing supernatural physical strength.

In the chaos that followed the revolution, the mission and sanctity of Samson's person were lost sight of, at least apparently, by the Jews and it may be by Samson himself. He seemed to have given at this time of his youth, in the social and moral disruption of Sorek, some slight grounds for the mass of unsavory legend that overlay his history. However that may be, when affairs finally adjusted themselves and the Jews learned that the right to exist and even

freedom of religious worship were granted them, they sought out Samson and ordained him judge and priest of Israel.

There was no question of his being unlike other Jews, and his superiority in mind, heart and temperament excepted him from the useless, formal restrictions otherwise imposed upon him by the Levites. Even among Persians and Syrians, except where he was feared by the ignorant as a mysterious half-god, he was loved and even obeyed. Only to such secluded women as Delilah was contact with the Judge of Israel denied. But as he stood that day when she first saw him, his blood thrilling to the call of the riot of color and of sound, of the courtesy and precedence of the kingly pageant, he had long ceased to take notice either of the painted beauties of the streets or of the simple Jewish women who cast shy eyes at their priest who was a man.

At times the service of the temple irked Samson: the wonders of the manifestation ascribed to the cherubim on the ark left him generally cold and incredulous. Only as a teacher to the young and in actual ministration to the poor and needy did he find outlet for the impulse to action that constantly tormented him. Deeply conscious of God, he was no religionist; imbued with the spirit of service, he loathed outgrown ritual; sensitive to inspiration of duty, he revolted at the oracular mummery of the Levites.

At periods of his greatest unrest, he would consider

going back to Erech, not because any knowledge of his family or his home drew him there, but because without being dissatisfied with his fate as a priest of the temple, he was conscious of an apologetic attitude to some inward court that warned him he was not living up to the full measure of his powers.

So Samson looked to Erech, as if there he might rid himself of this reproach, how he did not know. Of late he had felt invisible checks and infinite adverse influences. His burden had so increased that in spite of his earnestness and a real joy in his service, he dropped into the flame, the night the khan burned, in a desperate hope that self-realization might come in death since it seemed he was not to find it in life.

But this mood had passed with the tragic darkness and he set himself to conquer the irritation he felt at this senseless delaying of his departure from Mesech's house, the morning after the fire. He fought his depression and forced himself to take some interest in the domestic aspect of this familiar apartment, whose solemn purpose he had felt so keenly when a child.

The windows above the audience chair opened toward the temple—the temple from which he had never been absent so long before, since his ministry began. He mounted the steps and looked out between the bronze scrolls to the huge pile that in spite of its cold walls looked dear and home-like to him. The gates were closed and no smoke of burnt-offering arose. Then it came upon him again what great consterna-

tion his long absence had wrought among the servitors of the temple and immediately all consideration of his own predicament fell from him and he was concerned with the anxiety of his people only, which he seemed at present powerless to relieve.

Delilah had guiltily resolved to flaunt her beauty in the face of even the less-favored slave-girls who attended her in the bath and to enjoy to a heightened degree the feel of the fragrant water, the manipulation that followed and the languorous ease of the after-rest. But she was disgusted to find that generous warmth would not bring the desired relaxation to tense muscles and that her overstrained nerves would not lend themselves as readily, even as usual to the pleasure either of vigorous thump or of gentle touch. And though as daintily arrayed as a flower and as pure, she found no pleasure in herself as she followed Selma and Manasseh into the court after the bath.

The nurse stopped to examine a blossoming shrub and blinded a bit, perhaps, by the glare of the sun in the open place passed through a corner of the audience room and out again without seeing Samson. But Selma whose bright, quick eyes noted all things, drew her mistress into the room and pointed to the man who stood with his back toward them.

CHAPTER V

The identification of Samson with the man of her dreams had such an effect on Delilah's hitherto deep, slowly-moving stream of emotion and her meeting with him the night before had so prepared her that she did not stop to consider why he stood near her father's chair. She was of that sort of woman to whom to feel is to will. Though she apparently ceased effort toward the satisfaction of a desire, nevertheless there went on in her ceaselessly, a subconscious striving for the attainment of that on which her heart was set.

So there was not an instant's hesitation as to what pretext she might use for addressing him when she saw Samson standing above her there. Selma was dispatched quickly for his knife and Delilah stepped noiselessly a pace or two toward him, fearing he would turn before she was ready to meet him. As she contemplated him it seemed as if a wave of warm blood filled all the spaces of her body from head to foot, choking her throat and blinding her eyes. Even a momentary nausea seized her but that passed and she surrendered her whole being to the pleasure of his presence.

Grateful strangers whose persons and effects he had saved from the fire, had discovered to Samson in the first light of the morning that his raiment down to the

sodden, scorched trunk triply plaited about his loins had been literally torn and burned from him and they gladly clothed him in their best. Unused to the modish fulness they put upon him, he had girded the coat with his own belt and his bare knees and calves shone like columns of polished ivory between the purplish-gray of the cloth and the yellow, leather foot-gear. Delilah found herself wondering that he could be so splendid in the dress that the simplest merchant would scarcely deign to wear, not knowing that the choice of her unerring instinct had fallen on the sort of man that adorns his garments and indeed, creates his own environment.

She lived in the decent youth of the race, when the great mass of secondary sex-qualifications had not yet arisen to crowd out a woman's necessity for physical perfection in the man who should be the father of her children. Mental serenity and moral rectitude are the unerring accompaniments of unqualified bodily health and only the complicated perversions of modern civilizations have to account for their occasional, apparent divorce.

So, as Samson and Delilah stood that morning an arm's length apart, Nature struck her key-note and each being responded in perfect accord.

The sun had been clouded for a moment but now it shot its rays through the window, lighting Samson's fair, short hair. It seemed like an aureole, lending spirituality to his tired features when he turned and

smiled. Delilah advanced with the knife held by the tip, the hilt toward him.

"Thy sword, O King!"

She dropped in mock humility before him but he would not answer until she had risen and had given him back his smile, as she stepped toward him.

"'Tis sorry royalty, my Lady, for him, who may not bear arms." He moved as if he would leave her in sole possession of the dais.

"Stay!" She seated herself in the audience chair, her eyes not for an instant leaving his. "Lost honors are found again in this chair. Take thy weapon!"

He put it into his belt, noting as he did so, the contrast between his relatively slender, straight hand and her small almost square one. He did not know that the extremely opposed thumb, along with the width between the fingers had descended to her as an indication, a concomitant, a result of an overwhelming, cumulatively transmitted tenacity of purpose. Women so marked, outmatch the strongest men. This, Samson could not know and felt dimly only; but he put his hands involuntarily behind him, as she leaned over the arm of the chair.

"Now!" she cried gayly, "each to his own, again! My mantle—where is my mantle?"

"Thy mantle!"

Her nearness seemed to have blotted out what else was present and all that was past, for him.

"Hast forgotten? I gave thee—" Then Samson

remembered. "I gave thee my bordered mantle with buckle of amethyst!"

"Ah! true! but 'twas drenched with water, tarnished with smoke and now—the poor hath it—which, I know not!"

"'Tis well!" She clapped her hands softly. "I gave alms when I clothed the king!"

Samson stood beside the chair, looking at her intently as if spelling out a puzzle. A hunger, as long as his manhood and as deep as the sum of his unusual energies, was being appeased and he was quiet before her, not questioning anything. She, unembarrassed by the intensity of his steady gaze, sat on the edge of her chair, her hands lying on its rounded, golden arms. Suddenly she dropped her gayety and with a great seriousness in her eyes, asked him:

"Didst know who it was cut the rope?"

"Nay."

"Who didst think it was?"

The winning smile which was meant to ask pardon for the persistence set his head a-whirl.

"I—I thought—not—" he stammered and backed a pace from her.

She arose and stood before him, in wonder and in reproach, rather than in questioning.

"Thou hadst no thought of me?"

"No thought of thee."

The answer came coolly but an automaton spoke, a thing that was reporting an experience of the night

before, not the man now struggling blindly against he knew not what. Delilah dropped back into her chair, her arms lying lax beside her—incredulous of vacancy, so crowded was her own being with fulness of life.

“Who, then, was in thy thoughts?”

“The flames—the suffering in the burning khan—”

Grasping the arms of the chair, she strained up to him.

“Ah, there were flames—aye—and suffering—nearer thee!”

“Nearer!”

He crowded breathless over her chair, his eyes gleaming with a sort of ferocity. Then his hands covered both of hers, but she met his gaze squarely.

“Thou wouldst minister to strangers—hast thou, in thy great mercy—no heart? Doth it not choke thee now with its beating. Lay thy hand here.”

She pulled one of her hands from his grasp but just as his palm touched her overdress, Ahab entered with two veiled women. Delilah sprang to her feet and Samson straightened slowly.

“How now, Ahab! What errand hast thou?” she demanded.

“Here are dancing girls of Iran. Thy father bids thee find place for them.”

She turned to Samson who was still dumb with surprise and excitement, and her voice, that was so full of hauteur and command to the servant, caressed him as would an embrace, as she asked:

"Wouldst see them dance?"

Fountains, column, shrubs and veiled women whirled before him in a maze: he could not answer.

"Ah, yes!" She arose, gracious, yet so grand in manner, that Samson could feel bewilderment only, at the suddenness of her changes. "Entertainment for the noble guest! Fruit—wine—Ahab! Dance, children, dance!" She turned and laying her hand upon his, bore down ever so lightly. "Sit thou," she said and he dropped to the step at her feet.

Low music coming from some adjoining apartment had already begun and it grew in volume and voluptuousness until the very air was possessed by an inevitable passion. Samson in sitting had unconsciously caught Delilah's dress under his hand. As his excitement grew, he pulled it tighter and tighter until it stood taut from her neck and she was forced slowly to bend toward him. The dancers who had hitherto stood as if lifeless, now threw aside their voluminous veils and began to sway and bend in the initial movements of the dance. As their slender, half-naked bodies appeared, Samson caught his breath and looked up to Delilah, whose eyes, unheeding the graceful women, looked down into his. * * * No other thing moved. * * * The peacocks in the court had long sought the shade of the arbors. Even the growing flowers drooped in the great heat.

"Hast seen the dance before?" she questioned graciously, propping her chin on her hand that he might

not know how strained she was by his hold on her dress.

“Not—not as these dance.”

He kept his troubled eyes on her face and their mute appeal, with the tightening pull at her neck and drew her lips almost to his but—Ahab entered with the fruit and wine. Delilah straightened a bit and the hold on her dress was loosed. Then when the servant passed out again, she knelt beside Samson.

The music and the dance grew wilder and an ever-recurring note insisted on the permanence of each sensation. The sun that had marked the noon so fiercely a while ago, had now disappeared and a close, humid atmosphere, laden with fragrance from the hanging jars filled the room. Again the irresistible cadence deluged them and Delilah’s arm stole around the broad, straight shoulders beside her. As the clouds gathered outside, the shadows in the corners of the room grew deeper; the music died to a breath of sound and Delilah, slipping her hand beneath the edge of Samson’s tunic drew out a slender silver chain with amulets attached.

Snatched from his rapture, Samson seized her hands.

“The TERAPHIM,” he groaned. “Jahveh will smite thee! Loose hold!”

But, jerking her fingers from his grasp, Delilah snapped both the trinkets from the chain and hid them in her hands between her knees. Samson sat, para-

lyzed with wonder that the deed was not instantly avenged.

"What is this thing that is so precious to thee?" she said, hurt by his coldness, failing yet to understand.

He rose, sensible even in his great extremity, of the drenched eyes and quivering lips so near his own.

"Sacred tokens of the ancient covenant," he answered calmly.

She drew her hands slowly from between her knees, feeling the great control he was exercising without comprehending it and as Samson looked at them, knowing what they held, he gasped unwillingly:

"Unconsecrate hands!"

Delilah sprang to her feet and holding both palms out to him, with a tiny carven object in each, cried in an utter abandonment of self:

"'Unconsecrate hand!' Thou art priest—bless them!"

The dancing women fell on their faces, exhausted with fatigue and passion but the music still kept up its ceaseless suggestion. A generation before, in the desire and the will of Delilah's progenitors, this man's price had been paid and Samson, straining as if breaking bonds, crushed her in his arms and dropped with her to the dais.

CHAPTER VI

So sudden and complete was the surrender of Samson that he reverted to a momentary, primitive lack of custom strong enough to blot out all thought of the dancing girls, Mesech's house or the temple on the hill and only the finely wrought temperament of Delilah saved them from disaster, at this moment. Without any violation of the purity of her passion, she had been constantly alert for sounds that might indicate intrusion and when he had held her scarcely a second against his breast she sprang up, drawing him with her. The next moment she was advancing to meet her father in perfect self-possession as he with Abdul and Jezrah, followed by Ahab entered the room.

The music had ceased and the serving-man, arousing the prostrate women gave them pale, yellow wine in which balls of snow were floating. They drank mechanically, bestowing an only half-conscious stare at the apartment and its occupants. Mesech surveyed his purchase approvingly, then turned to Delilah.

"Ha! Daughter—hast put my gift to test?"

"Never were there such charmers!" Then noting her father start as his eyes rested on Samson who stood looking out of the window, added: "Even our guest was beguiled!"

Mesech frowned, repenting in a flash of anger his procrastination. The Jews would pay in the end and why should he show mercy or even temporary respite to this individual Jew who was defying him! If actually innocent of wrong doing, this priest was, at least, a source of irritation and discontent. He regretted that he had labored with Abdul and Jezrah until they had agreed that the Jew should be allowed to depart to-day although it was with the understanding that each should seek to contrive some new avenue of approach to his undoing that would not give shock to the other interests of Sorek. But it was too late now: he must wait and taking a moment to repress his anger at the word guest being applied to his prisoner, he managed to answer only as a parent reproves a froward child.

"Guest! Why was he not taken to the vestibule when thy diversions began?"

"Should he not see the dances of Iran, he who has seen none before?"

As Mesech would have answered, Manasseh entered and at a sign from her master crossed and spoke to him, privately, for a few moments. Then she dropped back, surveying critically the dancing women who were winding their many-folded veils about their heads and bodies. It had grown strangely dark by this time and the thunder of a coming storm booming over their heads, echoed and re-echoed through court and house. When it was quiet again, Mesech, unable to leave the

tender subject where it was, addressed Delilah once more.

"How is it—thou art of a mind to pleasure him?"

She smiled, darting a look at Selma then back to her father's face. "He hath been gracious unto me!"

Abdul unconsciously reflected that smile but Jezrah's face flushed purple with fury.

"Samson hath been gracious unto thee!" he burst out. "He hath refused high office and position at our hands! He hath refused to be scribe to thy father!"

Delilah turned to Samson and as if in response, he slowly wheeled and faced the people to whom up to this time he had paid not the least attention. A dash of rain, blown in at the window glittered on his lashes and hair. He swept an indifferent glance over the crowd, his gaze finally resting on Delilah who stood in the center of the room between him and all the others.

Jezrah who had been collecting himself for another effort, hurled at her: "He hath refused the honor of school-master to thee!"

There was a second's swift questioning in the look Delilah bent on Samson and though all were watching intently, no one saw a quiver of lip or any slightest movement of response in its steady gaze. But she smiled again at Jezrah—a smile full of assurance, yet tempered with a touch of trembling joy.

"He refuseth nothing—" then she stepped up beside

Samson and added—"at our hands, Jezrah. Father—Samson repenteth him of his decision!"

A frightful lightning-flash forked through the room and again the thunder pealed, long and deafening.

"Is the thing that thou hast blessed still unfit for thy tendance?" she asked of Samson in a low, sweet voice under the cover of the reverberating echoes.

Then aloud, when the noise had ceased, she cried to him so that all might hear: "Wilt be scribe to my father, Samson, and—and school-master of mine?"

Samson opened his mouth but the first deafening torrent of rain drowned out whatever the word might have been and he put out his hands perhaps to touch Delilah's, dropping them again as Mesech sprang toward the two.

"How is this—" Delilah's father began, but Abdul laid a finger on his shoulder with a significant pressure.

"'Tis evident, Mesech, thy daughter's grace hath effected what a statesman's wit was balked in!"

The storm burst now in all its combined force of lightning, thunder and rain over their heads, billowing the curtains, overturning the potted shrubs, blurring the court, and filling the room with a moist, drafty twilight. Delilah crouched far back into the big chair and Mesech spoke privately again with Manasseh.

When the first fury of the tempest passed, he raised his voice so that all might hear, barely controlling his fretful impatience at the interruptions of the storm: "'Tis done!" Then he turned to Samson, who stood

as white and as motionless as marble beside the audience chair. "Word reaches us but now, Samson, that a delegation from the temple awaits thee in the vestibule. We detain thee no longer." He motioned to Ahab who had been trying in vain to tie the flapping curtains. "Bid the porter give free entrance to this our friend at such times and seasons as he may list. He hath become scribe in the house of Mesech!"

Jezrah who alone had not taken advantage of the distraction afforded by the storm to ease somewhat the tension of the occasion, strode out of the room and across the court where a drenching rain hid him from view before he reached the entrance on the other side. Ahab opened a door that led through the house to the vestibule and at a sign from the master, Samson and Abdul filed slowly out leaving the two women alone.

Delilah, still crouched in her chair, became suddenly conscious of a great fatigue. Never before had a night passed for her as had this last one—without the closing of an eyelid and now that the time for action was passed, the protest of youth against abuse made itself felt in a numbness both of body and brain. Manasseh spoke to her but she did not heed and the nurse, mounting the steps laboriously took Delilah by the hand and drew her away to her bed.

The limp, warm fingers tightened spasmodically as Manasseh touched them and though the girl fell in a heap without so much as loosening her girdle and was

asleep before the woman had unbound her hair, it was some minutes before Delilah's hand relaxed and the teraphim lay exposed to Manasseh's view.

She drew very gently from beneath the curved fingers the two tiny, carven objects. One was larger but less graceful than the other and they looked in general like small horse-shoes of polished black wood. Manasseh noted that the open ends of both trinkets were fashioned unmistakably for feet with the toes distinctly, if conventionally marked.

She had seen these symbols carved in the door-posts of pagans, on obelisks and on other places in Sorek too often to feel sympathy with the respect they excited in the Jews. They were to her only a bit of the excrescence grown on Judaism, inevitable through years of unclean association. That Samson had allowed Delilah to retain them did not therefore shock her as it surely would have done, had she not been isolated from her people for so many years.

Neither Manasseh nor Samson, perhaps no Jew then living, knew the exact significance of these sacred trinkets.

It was unavoidable that the Jews, in journeying from Egypt up to Sorek, should be corrupted to some extent by the polytheism they met at every turn. In spite of Moses's masterful efforts and their devotion to him, the cults that appealed to their human instincts found an all too-ready reception and took such a deep

hold upon them that it was centuries before the remnants of certain heathen practices were outlived.

For instance, the worship of Asshur meant in essence, a veneration for the creative impulse, seen every where in nature. This involved the sanctity, hence a worship of human generative organs. Chief among the symbols of this faith was a more or less crude representation of the lower half of the body which, being fashioned more and more conventionally, finally was identified with the horse-shoe.

This symbol, typifying the eternally creative forces of nature, was placed at crossroads, over doors and set in the floors of vestibules, for the purpose of invoking good luck. Somehow, in the course of their wanderings, two pairs of these symbols, evidently male and female, found their way into the ark of the Jews, put there perhaps by some priest, tainted by poetry and polytheism. In time, these bits of wood became the objects upon which was poured out all the repressed tendency to idolatry, the instinct for a visible object upon which to vent the adoration that is latent in all men, even in the monotheistic Jews.

It was unavoidable, that among pagans, restrained by no ethical conception of religion, this cult of Asshur should degenerate into shocking lasciviousness. But, since the Jews inherited no knowledge along with these symbols, they stood in the Jahvehistic faith merely as signs of the sanctity of the wearer or of the importance of the occasion upon which they were displayed. One

pair had been lost by the priesthood at the building of the temple; but the other set, Chidon, the oldest servitor, had kept in the ark, permitting it to be brought out to aid in the solemnification of the most significant events, only.

At the ordination of Samson however, to the surprise of the other Levites and the lay Jews alike, the sacred objects were tied around the neck of the newly appointed priest. And, though these phallic symbols shared the common name, "teraphim," with many other more or less important amulets, every well-taught Israelite knew that most mysterious and unusual powers were attributed to them.

Was it possible that some psychic powers were inherent in the teraphim?—not of the comparatively slight influence of the Jewish personality but of that, growing from the immeasurably more important contact with the devotees of the cult for which they originally stood? Suppose some artist, fired with pure zeal by reverence for the eternally recreative power in plant and beast and man, had worked with fervent fingers until he had made a sign for the hope and the faith that was strong enough to see beyond the apparent waste and death around him. Suppose generation after generation had pressed these bits of wood to aching hearts, with the prayer that new life would come to redeem the loss of some loved one, or that barren, empty homes might be filled with the light and the laughter of children!

It is unlikely that the corrupt, the wholly perverted would turn to mere symbols, would take the trouble to stir their imaginations, where the stimulus of actual sight and touch was at hand.

So perhaps, it was possible that the unrest and the ignorant striving after fulness of being that inspired Samson when the teraphim were bound to him, were due to some inherent virtue of the things, derived from long, intimate contact with the highly electric beings who originated and gave them significance.

Manasseh had an impulse to destroy the teraphim and take what apparently slight blame might be attached to the interference, but something withheld her and she placed them again where she had found them, one in each palm of Delilah.

Who can say—would she have saved Delilah, ideally sensitive to subliminal influences, in her deep sleep of mere bodily exhaustion, from the fixed idea that was so soon to possess her, had Manasseh yielded to the impulse to lay the bits of wood on the brazier at her feet? Perhaps even then, the impulses in the smoke and the gas and the ash of the disintegrating wood might have entered all the sooner, for wilful intervention into the being of the sleeping maiden and might have hurried her all the more quickly on to her destiny. Who can say?

BOOK III

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD

CHAPTER I

In the first intensity of the moral shock Samson could think of nothing but the retreat to Erech and his habit of obedience only; the imperative duty of his daily temple service, kept him in Sorek until he could to some degree adjust his thoughts to the new state of his emotions. At first, he was stunned by a sense of defeat and could reason disaster only and the utter undoing of his usefulness. But as the long days dragged on and no catastrophe befell, the monotony of the ritualistic, half-mechanical movements of his mind and body brought calm enough for him to realize that the Temple was still the Temple, that he was even yet priest of the Jews, and beloved of Israel.

But the thing that changed the relations of his whole life was that, just as inevitably as Jahveh, Delilah stood in his heart and just as passionately as religion, love for her moved his being. This must he reckon on to the end of his days. At rare times, however, the incongruity of the two claims seemingly vanished, and circumstances and the designs of those most interested, aided him in providing for this new personality in his existence.

The people of Sorek, acting as they fondly imagined

according to their own grateful sentiments toward the man who had risked his life for the public safety, but actually moving in response to suggestion and even softly veiled coercion from Abdul, voted an empty honor and certain magisterial rights to the judge of Israel.

Wily from custom, rather than urged by any particular interest in this detail, Abdul had given orders to the leading Hebrew merchants of Sorek to fashion various, handsome costumes for Samson. These with a horse and car were sent to the temple a few days after the fire, accompanied by the approving shouts of the fickle mob, who were moved as much by the desire to experience a new thrill as to bring themselves into favor with officialdom.

The Levites, asking at the hands of pagans, only the means of existence and freedom of worship, looked with suspicion and actual disfavor on the honors heaped upon their young priest but they were borne down by the body of Jewish merchants who accompanied the only half-willing Samson back to Mesech's house, walking in dignified complacency beside and behind the glittering car, so that proper respect might be paid to the gracious Governor.

Samson neither ate nor drank with the uncircumcised, but when he took into his hands the reins of the white horse again, he bore with him tables of tangled accounts and certain scrolls of history and astronomy to be revised^{*} for the teaching of Delilah.

Samson's subsequent daily visits to the house of Mesech the Levites watched with growing discontent and when a month later, a lightning bolt shattered a wing of the temple killing lambs for the sacrifice and the princely white charger alike, all confidence ceased between the older servitors of the temple and the Judge of Israel. This perhaps was less painful to Samson because his school in the temple increased steadily and the Jewish people, always keenly alive to the betterment of their material condition, looked with disdain on the narrow prejudice of their elders and made an added demonstration of affection and respect to their judge who was so popular with the Governor's party.

To Delilah, the vision of Samson's priesthood had not been very clear. Her first sight of him had given her an idea only and their two other meetings seemed merely to establish his human manhood for her. So, when she saw him step from his car that morning and saw him throw the reins to those nearest, as one used to command chariots, whatever significance the visit may have had to Jew or Philistine it was to Delilah only that he had come to her again, as a prince should come to his own.

From that moment, life went with a glad rush of fulfillment for her. Even Samson, accustomed to the eager, acute, reasoning breed of Jewish mentality was constantly surprised at the rapidity of her progress. She would sit opposite him with parted lips^{*} and shining

eyes and scarcely had the word left his mouth before it was lodged in her mind, perfectly comprehended, to remain for all time. Indeed so wonderfully was she endowed, that from the mere energy of the highly developed, infinitely complex structure of her brain, the thought centers seemed to receive impression of identities at mere suggestion from Samson and at times, even before he could have said the word indicating the relation between the sign and the thing signified.

Assured of the love she craved, she no longer demanded and rarely incited demonstration of it. Constantly fired by shy tenderness, the mere presence of Samson and the increasing joy of learning from his tuition seemed to satisfy her.

Meanwhile, her hold upon him grew. But the path leading between impulse and action had been so long impeded by his ascetic training, that though her nearness in actual presence and thoughts of her when they were apart, filled his being with ecstasy, except on rare occasions when her impulse to touch him became irresistible, he rarely caressed her.

Three months of her schooling had passed, almost unremarked by the people of Sorek, and scarcely more heeded by her father and the members of her own household. The dreaded blow that meant eventual decline of prosperity to Sorek and loss of preferment to Mesech had at last fallen. Assyria had taken possession of the grazing lands to the north and no help

could come from Gaza. In fact, Mesech had sent the flower of his own forces to the king, at call for men to aid in the Egyptian campaign and now only the indomitable energy and resource of Jezrah could make what lazy, untrained soldiers remained, in any way equal to the rigidly disciplined ranks of Assyria. The campaign on the border almost completely absorbed the Governor's attention but Abdul kept a wary eye on the Jews lest in spite of Samson's apparent content, he might be waiting a favorable opportunity only, to go over to the enemy.

Abdul had been willing in the beginning to remain in Sorek on his relatively unimportant business until the first storm aroused by certain measures of which he was confessedly the instigator had passed over in Gaza but at the end of three months he found the stirring pace of the court no more interesting than the clash of personalities in this far-away Sorek. Accustomed to name his motives, he was obliged to confess that Delilah held no small share in this influence. He alone was sufficiently alive to what forces were set in motion when Delilah should play pupil to Samson. He watched them as the two sat under the shady arbors of the courts and in the breezy, fountain-cooled halls of the palace. But he could understand Samson's restraint and gloomy intensity of instruction no less than Delilah's apparent satisfaction at his being mere teacher—and no amount of spying could discover him more than that.

He, skeptical of friendship, sated of women, felt strangely drawn to Delilah, with an attraction he could not wholly analyze. Proportionately, a deep dislike for Samson made itself felt. He could not forbear despising a man that was letting the gold of life run through his hands like water, loosing his grasp on the temple, risking his hold on the Jews and burning his fingers doubtless, at this fire which would assuredly never bake his bread. Urged by an unwonted desire to bring things to a crisis, to test the priest's torpor and to try this woman's temper, Abdul set himself about to discover to what extent disaffection had spread among the Jews and if possible, in case of his sudden recall to Gaza, to carry back with him the report of the killing of the root of all internal dissension, even if affairs on the border still persisted troublesome.

So for days together, he disappeared and only Mesech knew that he was in the byways seeing and weighing all things, beguiling everyone. As yet, Mesech knew nothing but that there was a strange indifference among the Jews as to tax-gathering and since Abdul had not appeared at the palace for many days and something might be forthcoming at any moment, he was immensely relieved when word came that affairs at the border had quieted to such an extent that Jezrah and Ahab were returning for a few days to Sorek.

Report of the seeming success against Assyria and

the Captain's return had been carefully disseminated among the people and a general sigh of relief went up from hearts little accustomed to be concerned over non-essentials. Every Philistine in Sorek had felt his measure of uneasiness and every member of Mesech's household except Delilah was shadowed by the war-cloud.

Even Selma, lacking the stimulus of the long-sustained courtship, drooped so spiritless that it would have been depressing to one less buoyant and happy than her mistress. Without perhaps divining the cause of the girl's trouble, Delilah constantly stimulated Selma's imagination by her own love-joy and so constantly prodded her to action that of late a sort of self-assertion and new luxuriance of emotion had developed in the hitherto dependent, cold-blooded little Jewess.

They sat together on the evening that Jezrah and Ahab were expected to return, in the upper chamber that served as a sort of office to Mesech and school-room to Delilah. The entire north wall was paneled in alternate slabs of pinkish marble and gilded wooden cupboards that held both the official and private library of the governor. Under a row of windows at the east, a long, slanting shelf served as a desk and underneath this were piled small chests of inlaid wood bound with polished metal containing seals, documents, keys and governmental regalia. Opposite these windows a broad staircase of marble and bronze led with a single

turn to the roof and the south wall was merely a series of high, rectangular openings that led out to a balcony running entirely around a small inner court.

A single, bronze lamp hung from the dusky ceiling, lighting the heavy, purple curtains that shut out the night breezes from the court, keeping the gold thread in the cushioned couch and the girls' dresses a-glitter. Selma settled herself more comfortably and glancing at Delilah who lay smiling dreamily, continued her reading.

"At her feet he bowed, he fell, he—"

Selma heard the catch of a suppressed sigh and lifting her eyes from the scroll, found Delilah staring at her, penetratingly.

"Did'st ever swoon, Selma?"

"Nay," and Selma, embarrassed she knew not why, sought her place in the roll again and hastened to continue reading.

"At her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he—"

But there was prohibition in the hand that fell decisively down on the green and gold parchment.

"Nigh had I swooned, once, Selma."

"Thou!" and Selma relieved, smiled incredulously. "I thought that in thy whole life thou hadst never known an illness! Of what sickness hast thou swooned?"

Delilah sank to the divan again putting her hands under her head and lying with closed eyes; a greenish

pallor, wont to come in moments of excitement widened about her mouth and her breath left her in a sobbing sigh.

"Sickness! Ah yes! 'Tis sickness!" she murmured.

Selma lately made alive to sympathy sprang up and bent over her mistress with nervous apprehension.

"Speak! Lady! Where is thy pain! How doth it afflict thee?"

The white, black-fringed lids fluttered and opened and Selma's troubled brown eyes looked into dark wells of happiness as deep as eternity. The girl started back, pained at the trick but the caress of the hands that caught her was too sweet and compelling to allow even a moment's chagrin.

"Calm thee, child! 'Tis no plague nor poison! 'Tis—" She drew the quivering face down to her own, "canst not divine, sweet sister?" But Selma, stricken with stupidity at the mere necessity of quick thought and answer shook her head sadly. Delilah arose and walked a pace or two in agitation, then turned to the girl again who, impelled by the other's vehemence, bent toward her with something more than willing interest. "What is it that burneth while it freezeth?"

But Selma's puzzled eyes denied understanding. "I know not," she answered.

"That setteth to naught the power of armies yet no man hath seen it?"

Selma's shadowed face fell into lines of racial marking, furrowing forehead and cheek. "I know not," she breathed in a lower, tenser tone.

"That maketh me new—yet poureth into my veins the blood of ten thousand years!" The vibrant, insistent question came again and Selma sprang up distraught.

"The fever of—"

Delilah put her hands on the maid's shoulders and bore her gently back to the couch. "—of love, my Selma."

The curtains swayed with the night's breeze and the lamp's flame flared into a long, yellow flambeau, darkening the room for a moment. From the tiny, flower-embowered court a nightingale's song poured out and its cadence was beaten off by the boom of a far-away bell. Tears of excitement and relief dropped slowly down Selma's cheek but fell unnoticed by Delilah who, when it became silent again, began to pace up and down the long room. Finally she stepped in front of the sitting girl and still not noticing the tears, smiled teasingly.

"So—he is young! Straight as a pillar of the temple—with head of shining bronze, eh, girl?"

But Selma shrank from her gayety. "'Tis in thy blood!" she gasped, surprised out of her prudence and Delilah's face straightened.

"What! What sayest thou?"

"Nay—nay, heed not. I knew not what I said,"

and Selma strove to recover herself. "But—he—he is thy teacher!"

"Yes," and again Delilah was serene, jubilant even.

"Of histories!"

"Of mysteries!"

"He is thy master—!"

"Yes."

"Of lute!"

"Of life."

"He is priest!"

Neither Delilah nor Selma perceived that the farthest curtain had been pushed aside and that Samson, clad in splendid but sombre attire stood directly back of them. When Selma's last sentence flung itself out at Delilah he started to speak, but the answer came more quickly than his tongue could move.

"He is king!"

Samson whirled her about and crushed her against his breast. "Thou art queen!" he murmured.

"Of what, my lord?" she queried when she could find her breath.

"Of love, and of my life."

Selma, still in a state of bewilderment, crept out unnoticed.

CHAPTER II

Delilah, in a delirium of excitement, worked up out of her own emotion and from the joy of Samson's fervid embrace, pushed him away, striving to find a safer footing, conscious that the touch of his arm and breast, like old wine was firing her veins and weakening her knees.

"Hast brought me new songs?" she panted.

"Hast learned the task I set thee?" he gave back, drawing her to him again, but gently.

"Aye, and more! Listen!"

She sprang from him and running up to the platform on the stairway, faced him. Again the nightingale flooded the room with song and while she waited for it to become quiet he looked at her, drinking in her beauty as a thirsty man drains a cup of cold water. A filmy head-dress covered her hair and a portion of her neck, without destroying the perfection of her beauty.

Samson did not for an instant analyze her loveliness or stop to consider what was the strong, subtle fascination that seemed to exhale from her constantly, so powerfully did it affect him.

The cold-blooded Abdul had reasoned that the texture of her skin and the shape of her body had

no less to do with the attraction she possessed than her sympathetic, gay temperament.

The line of shoulders, bust and hip, so full of power and grace, unconsciously promised to the unrealized demand of strong men that here was impulse to conceive, place to contain and adequate fluids to nourish the children whom they would beget. But beside Abdul the worldling, these were mere children in the wilderness of their own dim, divine desires and when the nightingale's song had died, Delilah's voice, sweeter than any bird's note, rang out in innocent, prophetic declamation:

“ ‘The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel until that I, Deborah, arose; that I arose a mother in Israel. They chose new gods; then was there war—’ !”

Samson sprang up in a flash beside her. “Where hast thou heard that? How camest by it?” he gasped.

She put him aside, half in earnest, half teasingly. “Stay!” “ ‘My heart is with the governors of Israel that offered themselves willingly to—’ ” but he stopped her beyond all possibility of continuing.

“Thou art Israel Incarnate,” he breathed. “What dost thou mean!”

“That I love thee,” she answered simply.

“Then mock no longer. How camest thee by these verses?”

“Selma hath them.”

“Ah, yes—the Hebrew maid.”

Samson sighed in relief but sat gloomy. Opposite him on a level with his eyes, screened only by a delicate grill-work of bronze, a row of windows looked out past the town to the hills in the distance. The devout—and perhaps cautious—Jews had planned that the temple should be seen from this point. The sombre pile loomed black under the cloudless, moonlit sky and Samson in a sort of abstraction noted that lights flitted within, here and there and that the usual faint haze from the great altar erected below an opening in the roof, was growing to a vermilion cloud, as if sacrifice was being offered at this hour. But the warm, soft hand on his arm divided his attention, although it increased his foreboding.

“Is it forbidden that I should say them? Art displeased that I learned them?” she whispered.

“Much is forbidden—”

Her hands pressed hard upon him, and turning to her with a smile he put his arm about her—“but in naught couldst thou displease me.”

She smiled, reassured. “Hast brought me new songs?”

“Nay, thou hast a respite. Matters of importance claim me now and for many days. But—I have brought thee a gift.”

“A gift! Thou—to me?”

“Aye—that it may come back to me from thee!”

“’Tis thou that mockest!”

He sprang up and going to his cloak that lay against a pillar, fetched a small wooden bird-cage.

"See!"

"A dove!"

"Nay—a carrier-pigeon!"

Samson took the bird from its prison and laid it gently in her hands.

"Ah—h," she held it up noting its beauty and strength. "Carrier-pigeon! Yes, I have heard—they carry words on scrolls!"

"From one Temple to another—the winged courier of captives."

"And this white messenger—?" she murmured, as she laid the cool, sleek feathers against her cheek.

"Is thine."

"For—to what end?"

Delilah raised her eyes, in a beginning of concern, from the bird to his face, but he drew her down beside him.

"How many moons have I been thy teacher?" he finally asked.

"Three."

"Three! And just so many moons have I lived—not in the court of the Temple but in thy smile; have dreamed—not of the fate of Israel but of thy touch,"—she looked up and would have questioned his meaning, but he would have no interruption—"have hungered, my Beloved, not for righteousness, but for thee!"

"And this restless bird!"

She persisted, smiling, happy, in spite of her great foreboding to take such words from his lips. The pigeon fluttered and settled in her hand. Then, from below came the sound of horses' neighing, voices blurring into one another and the shivering clash of great doors closing. Delilah started, knowing that Jezrah had come, but Samson seemed not even to hear, keeping his eyes on the fitfully illuminated temple, holding her tight—closer each moment.

"I must think of my people—must abide in the Temple."

She wrenched herself from him. "Wouldst leave me?" she cried shrilly.

For answer he kissed her, caressing the trembling hands that held the quiet bird and when he spoke it was more to himself than to her. A gong in the great court, used to call the servants from distant parts of the house, was struck with five sharp beats and Delilah could smell the resin of the torches. Now Jezrah would be eating in his hurried, jerky way and her father would sit in patience until he had finished. Delilah laid her hand on the strong, clenched one at her knee to assure herself that she was not Jezrah's, but another's.

"Something mysterious, stirreth in the air," Samson muttered. "I know not what. We are captive—under covenant with thy people who have kept their part. It cannot be that I am blinded to a rising of Israel. Yet, messengers to the Levites come and go. See!" He

pulled her close to him and pointed through the window. "The Temple is alight—court and tabernacle! A moment ago, it was lost in the darkness."

They sat quiet for a time, she barely understanding the significance of what she heard.

"Look again!" he exclaimed. "All is black save the altar! Is it a signal—a sign I know not?" He sighed, and turning laid his cheek on hers. "But thou, Beloved, 'tis blankness of death when I see thee not. Yet—for a season, must I abide by the cherubim."

"And this bird?" she persisted sadly.

"Shall bring a message from thee. Should there be an anxious hour, thou hast to bind a word about its neck only, and it will wing straight to me."

"Ah! Would I could go in the bird's stead!"

"Wouldst come to me, Delilah, never to return?"

She drew away proudly from him. "I have said that I love thee."

"But thou hast not said that thou lovest me more than thine ease, thy place of honor and thy people."

She put the bird resolutely back into the cage and as if to escape the signaling temple, drew Samson with her to the floor below and pushing him down to the couch as he would have held her close to him, stood away a little distance.

"Knowest naught of woman's love, Samson,—of tenderness—of constancy?"

"I have loved none but thee."

"Then shalt thou know. Thou sayest mine ease is dear to me and I tell thee I should joy to run until I dropped, for thee. 'Twould please me to work for thee until my arms hung nerveless—I would drink water from thy hands and call it rarest wine—would sleep on a stone beside thee. As touching my place of honor: of what account are the courtiers that sit at our feasts! Do I look at one twice? He hath a turn of head that remindeth me of thee. Do I listen to his words? He hath expressed thy thoughts. Do I laugh or weep at the music? It telleth of thee and me. Dost know there is but one woman in the world to me and she is Selma? Canst guess why? Because she hath seen thee—hath heard thee—walks where thou walkest and mayhap—hath a drop of thy blood in her veins!"

"My Love—come!"

He bounded up and stood beside her, his breath burning her cold hands, as she held him at arms' length.

"Nay, not yet! And my father: he guardeth every wish and each simple trinket of my mother with such unusual care! Had I been his child—had I been Delilah to love and want thee, had he not—"

But her defence gave way and dropping the hold on her wrists, he held her close to him.

"Thou shalt leave thy father—and cleave—come!"

But she still denied him everything but this bodily hold.

"Nay, thou knowest thou mayest not be yoked with

an unbeliever—" She felt his arms loosen about her—"lawfully," she added.

"Yes," and the light died from his eyes.

"And it saddens thee!"

The lamp flared again and showed her how pale his face had suddenly gone. His hands fell to his sides but she persisted, the scarlet line of her mouth growing thinner and straighter. "Even to the point where thou didst resist my love—thou art even now battling against me!"

He threw out his hands beseechingly. "Delilah!"

She stepped quite close to him and took the hands that had dropped hers. "At last, am I possessed of the matter," she answered gently and there was a half-suppressed note of triumph in her voice. "Out of so much strength in thee has come weakness. Because thou art a man thou mayst never know a woman's part in life. It is meet that thou shouldst think of family, of honor of religion! But for me"—she raised her shining, happy eyes to his—"it is given me, only to love thee. In that, I fulfill the law!" He shivered, and would have checked her, but she stayed his motion. "God's law, not my priest's nor thine. I need not ask what befits: out of love, I make family, honor, religion! Nay, I pray thee, do not touch me. I must tell thee—now! For the future, I elect thy lot; it is destiny that I should sing thy songs, revere thy people and—love only thee! If this giving of myself, soul and body, doth not make agreement with thy

written law, I appeal to thy inscrutable God, thou Israelite, and take thee—!"

The room grew dark before her: a queer sense of suffocation and a tightening at her heart mastered her and she lay for an instant unconscious in Samson's arms. Then as a quiver runs through a loosening dam, ere the fettered waters are free, she felt a tremor pass through the limbs that pressed against her and when she could lift her eyes again she saw Samson's face—pallid even yet without; but glowing from within in the radiance that illumined her own soul.

To the right under a stairway, a small door led to the corridor and though they each heard steps ringing upon the flagged floor, and voices in dispute, neither moved nor heeded.

"Even as I take thee, Delilah," he said reverently and laid his hands in betrothal in hers. Then, someone fumbled at the latch and lifting her he disappeared with her behind the curtains in the balcony.

CHAPTER III

Jezrah's high, rough voice had assailed the walls until it seemed to Mesech's jangled nerves that the echoes rang and clashed audibly. But he sought control and his tones seemed even sympathetic when at last, he answered.

"Thou demandest more than may be granted, Jezrah."

"I ask only the keeping of thy word. Thou hast promised that if the serpent lift his head—"

"But where hath he lifted it? Methinks he is only a comfortable priest taking his pleasure quietly. He studieth much of the heavens and philosophy and teaches here and there in our homes. 'Tis little mark of dangerous demagogue."

The placating tone seemed to whip Jezrah into an angrier impatience.

"Have I not told thee it is common report at the border that camels are stalled, provender stored and all things made ready for departure?"

Mesech frowned as he bent toward the Captain. "Has it crossed thy mind, Jezrah, that this be intentionally a false report, a decoy to thin thy forces besetting Assyria?"

"But if it were in very sooth, true account!" Abdul broke in.

"Then," and Mesech settled back into his chair, "then, one of Jezrah's good cohorts would whip them back as truant children!"

"But the tax," exclaimed Jezrah in no wise diverted, "the bags of gold, shall they be lacking in Gaza?"

"Ere noon to-morrow, the full count of coin will be ready. This, Samson sweareth. He hath gone among them daily, gathering and urging payment."

"How is it he must go about gathering and urging that which erstwhile fell in a willing, golden shower—from gratitude that we allow the Jews to breathe our good air! There is no famine!" Jezrah looked from Abdul's unresponsive face to Mesech whose furrowed brow and twitching lips denied the composure of his words and tone. "Why is the tax not ready?"

"I speak only of Samson. That he hath no hand in the tribute's tardiness, I know." Mesech answered a little sullenly. "What unfaithfulness his people may be hatching, I know not. Abdul, thou hast kept thy mouth as one who holds it full; we would hear of thy adventure. Doth it bear on this question of the Jews?"

Scarcely had Mesech finished when a patter of quick steps sounded on the balcony and they waited. Then the curtain parted and Selma was well within the room before she could realize that others were there. Blinded a moment by the light and embarrassed even more by the surprise of their presence, she began confusedly looking from one to the other: "I seek—"

Jezrah, used to alarms and sudden calls, sprang up.

"Is it I? Speak, maid!"

"Nay. I crave thy grace, my Lords. I seek—a bird—in a cage."

She darted here and there and finding at last what she sought, slipped away as quickly as might be. There was little need for any of the three to prod memory as to what was in hand, and Abdul began when barely the door had closed:

"It is irksome to be bearer of unwelcome tidings and in this am I greatly deterred, Mesech, by certain inabilities to proceed that beset thee." Abdul fastened his keen, cold eyes on the Governor's face. "Perhaps to force issue now with the Jews would ill accord with thy convenience."

Mesech waited a moment, cut to the quick by this sarcasm, yet master enough to appear not to merit it.

"More is meant than thou namest, Abdul," he finally said as he aimlessly buckled and unbuckled his sword belt, "yet, Gaza holdeth us both to account; thou art a cautious man—art not indifferent to Sorek." He studied the envoy's face a moment. "What dost thou know, Abdul and what is it thou wouldst have me to do?"

Jezrah breathed hard, eager to hear, judging the worth of Abdul's words by the value Mesech had put upon them but the envoy was not yet satisfied.

"Art willing—art able to move in the matter without delay if the cause and cure of dissension be discovered to thee?"

Mesech felt his ground slip from under him; felt the right to exercise his whimsical justice taken from him with a word, but Abdul stood for power in Gaza and beside, he was asking only the Governor's sanction of what seemed not only reasonable but inevitable.

"Thou hast my word," Mesech finally agreed.

"'Tis not a paradox I name you when I say that thou, Mesech and thou, Jezrah both have the right. 'Tis true that this Samson hath no thought of mixing his pleasure with the hard pursuit of war and yet, 'tis likewise true that all Israel is on the eve of uprising. It best serves the Hebrews' purpose to keep their philosophic priest, markedly cold to worldly account, ignorant of their purposes. But they well know what fiery valor lieth behind his sluggish seeming. From the first, revolt has been coupled with conspiracy against him, to force him to action. Let the ram's horn once blow martial blast and the ardor he lavisheth on star-gazing and lute-playing will, in a twinkling, be frozen to fanatical courage. He hath the spirit of leadership and when they shall have spurred him to his post there will be no lack of command. Without him, they would dare to court death, only; with him, they count on assurance of deliverance."

The measured sentences came slowly as if coined niggardly from a mint of knowledge and Mesech grasped the intent and full significance of each word as it came, feeling a certain lightening of his burden

that his course had at last become so directed by conditions, that all power of choice had gone from him. Jezrah, slower to see the implications, was the first to speak.

"Then, thou agreest—"

"I urge instant measure," Abdul retorted decidedly.

"His death?" Mesech brought the word out at last. He forced his eyes to meet those of Abdul squarely, so that in the days to come no apology or explanation need ever be offered by the one or by the other.

"No less," Abdul answered, when this tacit responsibility had passed between them.

"Show thy means!" exclaimed Jezrah, excited over the prospect of a solution or, in case of failure, sure discomforture to the arrogant Gazan.

Abdul turned to Mesech. "Thou hadst the means at hand!"

"He will take no gold from me or mine—nor gift, nor corruption of any name!" Mesech answered with a certain pride but Abdul stepped nearer him and his voice though it seemed to pierce the very walls, was scarcely more than a whisper.

"I crave thy pardon, Mesech, but thou art uttering sounding words! Thou knowest, from the beginning our thoughts have set on the priest's coming to his end—through thy daughter!"

"Thou hast said it!" Jezrah shouted, laughing in a spasm of hysterical rage, slapping his metal-bound

gauntlets noisily against the bronze braces of the stairway.

Abdul, unrestrained by the unmistakable pity he felt for the man he had trapped, addressed him again. "This one way remaineth, only, Mesech!"

The governor of Sorek arose and his ungirded sword clattered to the floor. He stood a second looking straight before him, then strode to the door under the stairway and struck a blow on a thin metal plate embedded in the marble. The lamp sputtered, flickered out and they waited in silence until Ahab appeared.

"Bring lights and bid the Lady Delilah come to us!" Mesech demanded. Taking up his sword he girded it and waited in the shadows of the moon-streaked room until Ahab hurried back, sticking cedar torches here and there into bronze brackets fixed in the walls.

They burned brilliantly and the air was heavy with the fragrant smoke when Delilah came, at last. She swept the curtains aside with one hand and in the other bore the pigeon. Crossing to the divan, she dropped upon it, mechanically caressing the bird but although she looked questioningly from one to the other, no one of them addressed her.

"Which is it—feasting or fighting that requireth woman's wisdom?" she inquired finally and Abdul was the first to recover.

"Each, Lady, and for each we lack finer wit."

She smoothed the bird's plumage then folded her hands over it in her lap. "To the fight! We feast later!"

Smiling at the three, she worked various disaster by reason of their lack of singleness of heart. Jezrah there and then renewed his vow to cut his way even past her own disinclination to where she needs must yield to him. Abdul's curiosity to see how thwarting and sorrow and undoing should serve Delilah was more than influenced at this moment by his habit of desiring what was forbidden to him. A hidden fire flamed in his eyes, blotting out craft and coldness in the look that he gave her with his answer.

"Wert thou Mesech's son, fighting in this case were feasting. As it is, thou overcomest the enemy by feasting's self!"

Not spending an instant's concern on what might be the nature of her usefulness to them, she felt a thrill of pride in that they were powerless to command her; she gloried in her newly-found right to do or not to do. Her sense of betrothal gave her a feeling of freedom—almost of daring and she smiled back at Abdul in his own humor.

"Death!" she found herself saying, for the words seemed to come of themselves, "by a clear drop on a ripe pomegranate!"

Abdul, glad of the opening, caught her up.

"Nay—by a good draught of pure wine! He is unwonted. One cup will drunken him!"

"Him! Who is unwonted?"

Her eyes opened in sudden terror. She searched the faces before her. First her father's, then Abdul's where a smile still lingered, and as her glance reached Jezrah he burst out before the others could stay him.

"Samson, judge of Israel!"

Delilah rose slowly and then sank to the couch again. A shout, faint but prolonged, bore in upon them from the streets but not even Jezrah could tear his eyes from the girl's changing face.

"I! To drunken him—wherefore?" she gasped finally.

"To make him as other men," Abdul volunteered.

"But I want him not as other men," she answered proudly, her cheeks flushing with returning self-command.

Jezrah, stung by her acknowledgment, flung at her, coarsely: "Thou or some other woman—it doth not matter!"

Heedless of his brutal anger, Delilah crossed to her father who sat gazing at her broodingly and stood before him. His glance fell.

"Art silent, my father? Speak—why is it that I should debase our friend?"

Still Mesech could not meet her gaze. "Abdul hath the matter in hand." He turned his lowered eyes to the envoy. "Tell her."

"Statecraft is hard listening for a woman but it is meet that thou shouldst know that the Hebrew captives

are on the eve of revolt; perhaps of exodus, only."

"Exodus, only!" she breathed, grasping its one significance to her.

"In either case, we are held responsible for their remaining here in peace, we—thy father, Jezrah and I."

"Should they seek to free themselves it meaneth slaughter. They have no soldiers—mad dreamers and women, only! If it be exodus, Assyria hath the bloody work and plunder yet the blame resteth on us the same."

He stopped but Delilah looked wonderingly toward her father.

"Still is it dark to me why I should betray my friend."

"There is no outcome," Abdul took up the story again, "but that should Samson live, he will lead this hopeless endeavor. If some mysterious power should slay this priest, not only would his people lose mind for fighting, but, crushed by the disaster, would turn willingly to their duty."

Her breath, held unconsciously during this speech, left her in one burst of expiration. She looked at the three men as one who sees for the first time strange, dangerous animals. It was clear to her now—their intent; her usefulness to them. She knew what she would do without consideration—but how!

"Shall one die for alı?" she ventured.

"'Tis not an inglorious end!" Mesech answered, em-

boldened by her apparent toleration of their purpose.

But that was the hair's weight that turned the scale against her temporizing. She scanned each face in a last desperate hope that, after all it might be foolish, brutal play, only; but seeing in them naught but anxiety and determination blended, she darted at her father in a fury of indignation.

"Then work it gloriously!" she taunted and her low, powerful voice plunged through him, stabbing with a double edge. "Father—bind Samson as stands in thy power! Thou Abdul, and thou Jezrah, whose face is awry with hate, give the priest sword—draw thine own and fight—as men fight—have fought through all the ages for mad dreamers and women!" She stopped in sheer want of breath and the pallid circle around her mouth, so marked in her flushed face could not escape Mesech's attention. He turned to her but she waved him back. "'Tis man's work. No woman's wit is needed here."

"But wist thee, daughter, no sword slays him, awake. In sleep, only, is he as other men."

A glance of rare scorn flashed back at him. "He groweth weary: he sleepeth by night." She turned to the trembling Captain whose murderous passion inflamed her only to more dangerous provoke. "Jezrah! 'Tis thy calling! Wend thy way past the gates of the temple of Jahveh—past the candlestick of brass—up to the veil of the sanctuary and strike him where he lies! So shalt thou serve thy Sorek!"

"Babbler! No man entereth the tabernacle save the anointed! No unbeliever seeth the face of the cherubim and lives!"

Delilah started, aghast at this strange confession of faith, coming at this time from so unlooked-for a source. It cured her fury of its unreason in a moment and robbed of all answer, she looked in appeal to Mesech.

"'Tis a last extremity, daughter," he began, wholly misunderstanding her silence. "Offer him the cup. He will sleep in a twinkling at thy knee!"

"Silence!"

Mesech's jaw dropped with the shock of her command.

"If thou arguest until sunrise, thou couldst make it not less hateful to me. He is my teacher—therefore, will I not entice him! He is my friend—therefore, will I not betray him! And," she dropped her voice, speaking in tones of perfect self-possession so that no word might be lost, "listen ye, Jezrah—Abdul—Father—Samson is my betrothed—therefore will I not fail to save him!"

Jezrah sprang toward her. "Traitor!" he hissed.

"Mesech, hearest thou?" Abdul demanded of her father, who sat as if struck by death.

"Unsay thyself, daughter! Thou art a maiden of Philistia, a Syrian princess! How claimest thou love for an outcast, a Jew! Thou owest reasonable duty to thy people!"

“Duty! What reasonable duty? My people!” There was no extravagance of passion now either in voice or manner. “Who are my people? Men, women and children out there? Am I not too, a woman? Are their lives and their loves greater than mine that I should give mine for theirs? And the children? Are not mine own children calling for their father: tearing wide the breasts they have never warmed and filled?”

She stopped, appalled at the words that poured from her like a torrent, apart from thought or volition.

This was the Fruit of the Tree she had eaten at their behest, when in wilful contriving they had set her in the midst of The Garden.

Jezrah overpowered, repelled by what he deemed a madness, was silent. But Abdul, who felt his worn-out manhood leap into new life at this vision of woman incarnate, longed for a sound of the deep, vibrant voice again.

“Thou art one—they are many,” he answered.

“Many is one—and one—and one, only. Each suffers for one’s self as I do.”

“ ’Tis no matter for thee to reason!”

Mesech, out of his whirling senses could find only stern command, backed by unreasoned anger. “Thou art my daughter. I demand thy obedience! Abdul, Jezrah—the audience is at an end. We lose time in more—”

As he spoke the curtain was torn rudely aside and Ahab, panting and disheveled burst into the room.

"Masters!" he shouted. "Sorek is mob-beridden! The people seek an Assyrian spy bound for the temple of Jahveh. They burn and kill!"

Out of the general consternation, Jezrah was the first to find his voice.

"Ha! The serpent, Mesech!"

"Strike, then—head and tail! Take horse and cohort and man the gates!"

Jezrah tore away and Mesech turned to Abdul.

"Thou and I guard approaches to the temple of Jahveh." Then he added under cover of putting on his cloak: "'Tis opportune interference."

No one seemed to regard Delilah, as she stood in the flickering torch-light, stunned by fear of what she did not yet comprehend. "The serpent," she repeated wonderingly, unconsciously crushing the bird. It struggled in its pain. She looked at it as if it were strange to her. "The dove!" she gasped and then the meaning of it all became plain to her.

To understand was to act and she tore a shred from the firm, white cloth of her sleeve. At her elbow were pots of colored inks and a blunt stylus and when a single line had been traced she bound it in place. Then mounting the desk, working the bird gently through the narrow opening in the grill-work, she watched it circle and dart forward on its course.

CHAPTER IV

The temple of the Jews was an evolution founded primarily on the idea of a fortified tent. In their wanderings among hostile people and in barren lands, the best housing they could offer for their shrine, ark or whatever visible sign they chose as an expression and focus of faith, was an awning of skins or woolen cloth and around this sacred spot invariably a wall of stones, earth or impedimenta was built up. Thus in whatever place, under whatever condition they built their house of worship, even when leisure, security and money, were at their command, it still kept the same outline: a sacred inclosure in the center, surrounded by more or less open courts and the forbidding quadrangle thrown around the whole.

Conventionalized this plan often was, to a marked degree, but study and near acquaintance with the building always disclosed its birth-marks. Aside from the bias of this tradition, the Jews borrowed freely from all sides, in details of architecture and decoration. In Egypt, they learned the awe-inspiring properties of size, of space, of long vistas of monotonous prospect, of multiplied colossi and of huge masses of natural rock. In Phœnicia they trained workers in brass and precious metals and he was indeed a poverty-stricken

Hebrew whose wife could not boast cunningly wrought carrings, ankle-bands and a bit of gold thread in her drapery.

The temple, huge, grey and forbidding as it was on the outside, was within both as to color and form, a complete expression of spiritualized Orientalism. The great gates guarding court and quadrangle were taken away at the time of the revolution but the sanctity of the tabernacle was still preserved to the Jews.

It stood on an eminence in the midst of the court and a score of steps led up to the double, bronze doors that opened directly into the vestibule. Behind this first apartment, was the Holy of Holies and a number of relatively narrow, corridor-like wings connected the two rooms with the outer buildings.

Within the tabernacle, kept sacredly free from useless ornament, or symbol not directly connected with the worship, there had been almost no attempt at decoration. Nevertheless, because of the rare beauty of material, a singleness of purpose in the whole and a perfect adaptation of parts it was indeed a fit setting for the jewel of the ark. The walls were of greyish-black stone but so intricately and daintily chiseled in volutes and lotus motifs that it looked as soft as cut velvet. Here and there its spaces were broken by the natural interference of doors which were hung with soft, dark, purple curtains on rings and poles of silver.

To the left was an altar-fire fed by a cunningly contrived trench of sweet-scented oil and on the right

stood the huge candlestick of brass, whose stem with the seven branches was fastened into the socket of a splendidly wrought pedestal of bronze and silver.

Three steps led to the Holy of Holies where reposed the ark. The opening was protected not only by the thick purple curtains that hung here and there about the room but a filmy white drapery fell between the sanctuary and the vestibule at all times. Beyond the curtains in the distance, raised the height of a man's breast, one could see dimly the bowed forms of the golden cherubin, but a violet haze blurred the details of the altar and blotted from view all else that the sacred place might contain.

Bamah was the most revered servitor of the temple. Orthodox, uncompromising, fanatical, he loved devotedly every duty and every adjunct of his office from the foolish lambs of sacrifice to Samson, on whom he lavished the concentrated passion of a powerful, unconsciously-thwarted soul.

He stood before the great candlestick forgetful of his task while the taper that he held burned shorter and shorter. A reddish-purple gown clothed him from head to foot, falling over his warped, knotted hands, and a black scarf enveloped his bowed head and crooked shoulders. A sigh, almost a sob, escaped him but he started and turned eagerly to the half-opened bronze doors when the sound of a quick, firm step reached his ear.

In a moment, Samson, his long mantle caught under

his arm showing the graceful, modish costume beneath, passed through the vestibule and with an affectionate greeting to the old man disappeared into one of the wings.

Bamah stood staring at the swinging curtain and his face that had relaxed in spite of himself at the sound of the springy step, hardened again. He went to the sanctuary door and pulled the thick drapery over the veil. Then he looked out over the quiet town, listened intently but was busy lighting the candles when Samson reappeared.

This time the young man's head was bare and the white linen tunic and straw sandals had replaced the garb so hateful to Bamah. Samson poured fresh oil on the altar from a silver cruse that stood near and bounding across the room started to close the bronze doors, but Bamah arrested him with a passionate gesture.

"Nay—not to-night! The doors close not to-night!"

His shaking hand had set the taper too close to the curtain that hung folded-back of either half of the door and a running flame scattered quickly over the pile of the cloth. Samson coolly beat the fire out between his palms, snuffed the taper-flame with a single pinch, then looked curiously at the old man.

"Wherefore, good father? 'Tis past the hour."

"Wherefore! Askest *thou* 'Wherefore'?"

Bamah dropping the taper from his trembling hands shot fire from his tired, deep-set old eyes. Samson

laying his hands on the doors again, barely restrained his impatience.

"I see no reason why an ancient custom should be this night abandoned."

But Bamah with the strength of almost insane indignation, seized the younger man's wrist and dragging him over to the door of the sanctuary jerked the curtain aside. The violet haze had thinned and he pointed to the great wings that arched above the ark. A tiny flame, red and unreal, played fitfully on the altar before it.

"Art blind?" And Bamah shook his crooked arm. "Seest thou not that the wings are spread? Last night they touched—so!" He locked his long, yellow, curved nails. "This morning they were spread—so!" He held his hands a finger's-length apart. "To-night—behold! The omen of Jahveh!"

Samson looked with pity at the old man. What had been unbounded admiration and even awe had changed, during the past year, into mere respectful regard, because of Bamah's unjustified and almost unbearable exactions. At times Samson was forced into unwilling disobedience to the expressed wish of the elder. To-night it was apparently a matter of no importance over which they contended but Samson was too divided in his mind to realize that here, if ever, was place for silence and unquestioning obedience.

"'Tis the heat, father," he said gently. "Thy altar-fire hath not died these three days. Hence must the heat spread the wings."

"Unbeliever!" Bamah screamed. "The cherubim are the body of Jahveh unconditioned by the elements! Art deaf as well as blind? See!" He pulled Samson down to get a clearer view, pointing within the sanctuary. "See my brother! Chidon lieth close under the fire he builded. He is prone since morning. Anon a quiver starts his muscles. He speaketh of one coming—of war—of deliverance!"

Samson turned away in impatience but Bamah grasped him with both hands. "'Open thou thy gates!' he sayeth. 'Wilt not heed? Wilt set at naught the will of Jahveh?'"

"Tis the babble of a sick man who hath lived too much on the ancient songs," he answered coldly. Then as the vision of the invalid, degenerate even where the ingrained, Jewish love of cleanliness had been lost appeared to him, he could not forbear a shudder. "He—he an instrument of God to man!"

Bamah sprang up, closing Samson's mouth with his hand. "Blasphemer!" he shrieked. "The fire shall purge thee—the madness shall possess thee ere thou art done! Thy days are spent in the house of the spoiler, thy nights in wanton dreams! What meaneth thy quick brain, thy strong arm for Israel? Better be a drooling dotard such as yonder seemeth, than one blind of eye and careless of heart in Jahveh's service!"

Samson's face paled and the old man out of words and breath, fumed inarticulately. A low moan sounded from the altar as Chidon jerking spasmodically, rolled

from side to side. Then when the paroxysm grew more intense Samson would have gone to him but Bamah held him back. It was inexpressibly painful to the younger man to look upon what seemed to be indications of great suffering without being able to do anything so he fell into his old habit of counting: this time it was the blocks in the marble floor in front of him. He was not looking at Chidon but was conscious after a little while that he had grown quieter. Suddenly the sick man arose and came toward them his hands held above his head, his eyes fastened vacantly beyond the two men, his lips moving as if he would speak. A sleepy bleating of tethered lambs made Samson start and Bamah drew the temple veil aside.

"What is it thou wouldst say, my brother," he urged.

"A sign!" Chidon shrieked. "A sign!"

Backing to the altar the sick man fell before it again.

The two men turned as by one impulse to where Chidon had pointed and a white bird flew straight between the half-opened doors to Samson's hand. Bamah watched him with nervous impatience as he loosed the message and read it. First surprise, then a smile and afterwards a look of wonder succeeded each other on the features the old servitor knew so well. At last, Samson crushed the fragment of cloth in his hand and crossing to the door looked about, listening. Bamah followed eagerly.

"At last thou understandest! At last thou wilt act!" he exulted. "We have long been ready. Arms, camels, bags of gold are waiting! Assyria is—" But Samson laid his hand over the old man's mouth.

"Cease! I am Judge of Israel—thy priest—the anointed servant of the Temple. Assyria is not for us. We have no part in her. Until our masters break their bond there can be no use for arms or camels!"

"We are bond—we are slaves!" Bamah cried. "Did not our fathers in Egypt—"

A rare fire holding the old man to attention, gleamed from Samson's eyes.

"It shames me to teach thee—I who am young, but even unaccustomed eyes may see that Israel is not bound to the Philistines except in weightless words. Israel is slave to her own imperfection!"

"We must have freedom!" insisted Bamah.

"Aye, but not that won by the sword," answered Samson.

"There shall be exodus!"

"Even exodus—but of new fashion—a going forth of new hearts! Only love, human love, eating away, grain by grain, the rock of the ancient prejudice can solve the hate and the craft and the power arrayed against Israel!"

Up from below, beyond the court came a roar of confused sounds. "Take the bird," Samson commanded. "Go to the north gate and bring who shall enter through the inner court to this place." He spoke as

one having authority and Bamah acting as if he were in a dream held out his hand for the pigeon.

When the curtain had dropped behind him Samson smoothed the strip of cloth and read again. "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson, I come." When will she come, he wondered as he hid the shred in his bosom. Wherefore? Is it trick? He took out the bit of cloth again, examining it and the markings. "Nay, 'tis hers. But—Delilah—alone—when danger lurketh!"

He sighed and stood in the door, but there was only the silence of midnight, brooding and ominous. A breeze had sprung up and clouds washed continuously across the face of the moon. Veils of mist floated between the buildings and under the trees: the court seemed alien and portentous.

All at once, shouting and calling from an hundred throats broke out beyond the walls very near and before Samson could realize what it meant, a figure dashed under the gateless portal and sped across the open space of the court, seemingly bound for the tabernacle steps. The terrifying noise grew nearer and jerking the doors together he stepped just without them facing the runner. As the blank, black bronze shut out the square of light, he saw the muffled figure drop on the stairs; but it rose again when he stepped out where he could be seen.

Then a cry was wrung from him by the very shock of his surprise and he never knew whether she came

to him or whether he went to her. But in a second, before the first crazed Philistine had gained the court he had caught her up, carried her within the vestibule and secured the door.

"My beloved!" he murmured, then tearing off her veil, saw the white, tired face. "Why hast thou come?" he demanded.

"The mob!" she panted. "They pursue me—my own people—counting me an Assyrian spy!"

Outside, the confused sounds of an angry mob and of many feet in hasty, irregular beats became more and more distinct. There was a moment's lull, a rush and the great doors shuddered. Samson, his face suffused with ineffable joy, appeared not to notice but she tore herself away.

"Hide thou!" she demanded. "I will answer them."

Again the doors were battered but he held her at arm's length, smiling. So much had he learned this night that he could seize this moment of joy: could feast his eyes on her beauty and inform his heart of her goodness with deliberate, perfect realization even while the Jews threatened his honor and the Philistines menaced his life. Stones rattled against the faithful bronze and staves were shattered in a foolish attempt to force an entrance.

"Go!" she pleaded again. "I will answer them."

"Thus do I answer thee," he said and taking her in his arms kissed her forehead, eyes and lips. Then drawing both the curtains and the temple veil aside he

set her within the sanctuary. The doors shook with the stress put upon them but he leisurely laid in place the thick folds of the purple drapery in front of Delilah and in the lull that followed a storm of blows, he threw both doors wide with a single jerk.

“Back, ye unwashed!”

Blinded by the light and his sudden appearance they sprang back from the door-stone and halted below him on the stairs. The more timid glanced around to the stragglers at the edge of the rabble in the court. The majority, however, took a firm stand on the steps, looking with desire on the glittering metal vessels in the vestibule, but with an equal degree of fear on the unarmed man who stood before them apparently with no thought of defence.

The unnatural excitement that had stiffened their courage to the point of their beating at the door ebbed a little before the silence and Samson's calm survey of them. The Jews might be a target for ill-natured remark and a butt of scorn but the temple was an institution that demanded unexceptional respect and not a man there but marveled to find he had dared put his feet on the tabernacle steps. Thus, their superstitious fear and the priest's god-like unconcern might finally have driven them shamefacedly away had not the brutish dullness or beastly acumen of the faces below him aroused Samson to impatient utterance. Some of them carried lighted torches and limbs of trees for weapons and not a few were provided with

good broad-swords. They grasped them with instinctive impulse toward their use as the impatient, imperious question rang out:

"Why disturb ye the peace of the Temple at this hour?" But though a murmur ran through the crowd, no man answered. "Art dogs that ye can only growl!" was flung back at them and their dampened anger leaped into flame stinging their lax memories.

"The spy! Thou hast harbored an Assyrian spy!" one man shouted, and another, encouraged by this display of boldness, made a pretense of dashing through the crowd.

"Seize the lintels! Pull his house about him!" he exclaimed.

Then "The spy! The Assyrian spy!" rang out from hundreds of throats as the crowd swayed and pressed forward and the impetus of the surge from behind forced the men at the front perilously near the priest whose impatience threatened to mount to anger.

"The blood of the uncircumcised," Samson exclaimed in his strong, trumpet-like voice, "shall appease the stones that one foot of thine shall besmirch if thou darest cross this threshold."

He indicated the line of the door-stone with his finger, pinning with his eyes the man who stood nearest him. The Philistine dropped back to a more comfortable position, and a youth elbowed his way to the front.

"We are not come to do hurt to thee or to thy

house," he said, "but to fetch him who is forfeit to us. To such, this place is not sanctuary!"

The boyish face and the moderation of the speaker instantly restored Samson's humor and indeed he had not been deeply moved. The miracle of Delilah's being there behind the curtain, back of him, dwarfed the danger and the importance of a mob.

"I swear unto thee," Samson answered with dignity not unmixed with kindness, "by the covenant that is between thy people and mine I have seen no messenger from Assyria."

"Whether thou hast seen him or not is little matter," and the Philistine Samson had cowed pushed his way to the front again. "We traced him to thy gate: he dropped from sight in thy court!"

The rabble heartened again by his tone and manner broke into shouts. Then, emboldened still more by the sound of their own voices and a growing familiarity with the place and the man, the whole mass heaved forward and made a lunge toward the door-stone.

But midway they stopped. Samson, his eyes closed and hands raised, sprang toward them. Unconsciously, at that instant of emergency he had assumed a pose demanded in the temple service: consciously, he had called into play the tremendous aid of the superhuman forces with which the love and confidence of trusting mortals invest true priesthood.

"In the name of Jahveh I bid ye depart!"

His voice echoing and re-echoing, over their heads

dropped down upon each man like a portentous threat.

Suddenly a yell of terror broke from the fringes of the rabble in the court. Straight from above the tabernacle a gigantic fan of colored light flared up. To their fevered minds it appeared as a monstrous hand menacing, beckoning them to destruction. The mob crouched in abject fear—those who saw it—from sheer terror at its unearthliness: those on the steps infected with horror at what no one understood.

Samson, possessed by a power he never questioned, still stood with closed eyes while the lambent reflection played around him; then he stepped a pace toward them. Again the flames, blood-red and living-green shot out above him. The hand closed—opened again and a cloud of white doves scattering from the flames flew whirring, unhurt, away. A breath of hot air dried the sweat on the forehead of the palsied rabble and when a ghostly figure appeared, as it seemed from the midst of the fire, raising its arms to hurl some strange terrible weapon at them, the pagans leaped in terror and trampling those who fell, dashed from the court. Samson, shocked by the report of their sudden, wholly unexpected exit opened his eyes ashamed of his having taken so cowardly and unstable a thing seriously, even for a moment. A few of the less fortunate were crawling away and he waited until the last one had passed out of the portal. Then, swinging the doors together with a sudden tightening of his heart he turned and faced—Bamah.

CHAPTER V

"Is the north gate barred?"

"Nay, my brother is there."

"Chidon? Hath he left the sanctuary? Is he so far recovered?" and the feeling of exultant security in which Samson had revelled gave way to a flash of anxiety. What would Chidon say to Delilah—what might he not do in his whimsical madness!

Bamah looked up with dull, conquered eyes. "Nay, Chidon goeth about as one sleeping, truly sick in mind. He hath fled from the face of the cherubim; the bride of Jahveh stood before him."

Samson smiled dryly, reassured. "Bidding him depart?"

"I know not, so deeply is he distraught." Bamah sniffed and looked about. "Hast smelt no scent of sweet woods—of oil of cedar and of palm? Hast seen no smoke?"

"What dost thou mean? What sweet odor should—"

Bamah came to him, laying his hand on the young man's arm and Samson saw he was unwontedly shaken. The strong, old face had almost suddenly taken on a look of pitiable senility.

"Chidon is of a surety bereft of his senses by this great vision."

"The bride of Jahveh?"

"Even so. As I sat waiting at the north gate a great light and a savor of sweet smoke came to me. I looked about and behold,—Chidon stood on the roof of the tabernacle bearing aloft the great earthen jar—even the pot of finely-expressed oil that our fathers did bring—"

"Yes—yes," broke in Samson, "but what did Chidon?"

"There lay a burning brand at his feet, even at the edge of the roof and ere one could speak he raised the pot aloft pouring the oil on the flame and though I shouted—when the oil was spent, he dropped the sacred pot that burned with a marvelous light."

"Was this all?"

"Even three pots of oil burned he so—and the doves!"

"The doves!"

"He had them bound in a net and laid them, wholly alive, on the fire." Samson shuddered. "But they were not consumed."

"Not consumed—in a fire of oil and cedar!"

"No sooner had the flame eaten the hempen cords than the birds, escaping with the smoke flew to the four heavens!"

"And what sayeth thy brother of these strange doings?"

"He moaneth only that all need for oil and doves is past—that all need for all sacrifice is past; that redemption is begun! Strange madness!"

Samson's thoughts flew to the sanctuary where the woman waited. Chidon's vision had no need to illumine the path of this man who was rushing so unswervingly, so gladly to the fulfilment of its prophecy. But Bamah though wrenched from his accustomed plane of consideration, yet had enough of himself left to be thrifty. "But son! Consider the doves—the oil! Soon cometh the feast of the Passover—not a feather remaineth, not a cruse is left!"

"Israel grudges neither bird nor oil if it cureth a faithful servant's sick fancy," Samson answered gently, but started in alarm when Bamah turned as if he would enter the tabernacle.

"Where—what is it thou—?"

"I go to Chidon. He prayeth me to bear him company to his home." As he spoke the steady beat of horses' feet sounded hollowly in the court. "Horses!" ejaculated Bamah.

Samson laid both hands on the old man's shoulders and looked him sternly in the face. "Father," he said, after a second's scrutiny. "A mob is loose on the town; the watch is abroad. Knoweth aught of an Assyrian spy, bound for the Temple? 'Twere better——" but Bamah slipped from the detaining hand, and the sound of metal-bound foot-gear rang on the steps.

"Hist!" the old man whispered. "They come!" Bamah staggered toward a door at the left.

"Bar the north gate," Samson commanded, "and

fetch thy brother." Bamah left the room with what alacrity was possible to him and Samson drew the small altar on which a low fire still burned before the steps leading to the sanctuary. As it slipped into place the bronze door was beaten with swords.

"Who knocketh?" he demanded.

"Mesech, governor of Sorek!"

Samson stood a moment motionless, knowing that he must open the door in front of him and open it quickly, yet dallying with the temptation to look for one brief moment on the woman behind the curtain. He had so long obeyed the behest of the temple and of custom: had so long fought his inclination: so long struggled against the passion that was fast rendering insignificant all other impulses that now, in the tumult of the unusual happenings that were breaking over him, he experienced an almost overmastering desire to put an end to these agonizing delays and go to the woman who had come to him. But better judgment prevailed and he swung the door open, just as the sword was about to descend upon it again. Abdul started to enter but Samson barred the way with outstretched arms.

"'Tis forbidden. What wouldst thou, Mesech?" he demanded with mingled pride and respect, but Abdul made the answer.

"What meaneth this stir among thy people, to-night?"

"Among my people? I know not."

“What meaneth this fanciful display of fire: this opening and closing of doors when custom hath long had it thy house is dark and quiet? What do the Jews in their temple, this night?”

“No Jew, save myself, hath entered the Temple since sundown,” Samson answered coldly.

“No Jew—but a stranger,” Jezrah snapped out pushing forward. “Who is the stranger that hath visited thee?”

Samson, not answering Jezrah, turned to Mesech as if for a farther questioning, but the latter motioned to Abdul.

“Yea, shun the matter no longer, Samson,” the envoy began patronizingly, “Never a Jew hath set foot in thy court to-night; who then hath come?”

“No stranger to mine or thine,” Samson answered promptly, “but the meanest of thy street rabble, questioning me as touching a matter concerning which I know nothing.” The men in front of him looked from one to the other. “Again I ask,” and Samson looked to Mesech, “what wouldst thou?”

Mesech stepped a pace nearer the forbidden line and looked the priest squarely in the face. “Hast seen, or directly or indirectly taken counsel with an emissary from Assyria this day?”

“Nay.” Samson met his gaze steadily and the answer came with not less respect than firmness.

“Hast connived at the harboring or escape of such a man?”

"Nay."

"Knowest aught of such?"

"Nay."

The altar-fire flickered, flared as the last drop of oil rushed to its destruction, then died. A curtain at the left was pulled feebly aside and the two Levites entered.

"Who be these?" Mesech asked testily.

"Levites, bearers of the ark!" Samson answered.

"Whither bound?"

"To their rest."

"Ha!" snarled Jezrah. "Hooded and swathed! Is it token of their order?"

"'Twere easy to prove thy telling. All Sorek knoweth the drawn foreheads and purple lips of the Levites," Abdul suggested but Samson turned again to Mesech.

"Is proof lacking to thee?" he questioned, and the touch of reproach with its suggestion of intimacy, robbed Jezrah of all moderation.

"Seize the traitors!" he shouted.

The soldiers started forward but Mesech signed them back.

"Thy place, Jezrah," he said sternly.

Samson sprang to the candle-stick and tore it with a single wrench from its socket. Swinging it above his head he lighted the faces of the two Levites whose hoods he drew from their heads. The soldiers, forgetful of discipline peered around the shoulders of

their officers and Jezrah could not hide his chagrin. Mesech nodded to the priest and turned to command his men.

"Safe conduct for the Levites!" he shouted and the soldiers repeating it, called down the line until the sound died without the enclosure.

"Wilt meet thy obligation concerning the tax, in person on the morrow?" Mesech demanded of Samson as he turned to him again.

"Two hours after sunrise, as thou requireth it."

They faced each other for a moment, then the Governor, wheeling about, signaled the soldiers who marched noisily down the steps. Abdul and Jezrah fell in behind and Mesech followed them slowly.

Below in the court, horses were mounted in silence and the governor looking back as he passed under the portal saw the priest standing as he had left him outlined against the darkened vault of the room, by the guttering lights of the candles.

When the last intruder passed from sight Samson set the stem of the candle-stick into the pedestal again, drew the doors slowly together and dropped the curtains over them. The candles began to sputter out, one by one. He moved the altar on which the fire had died back to its place and pulled the sanctuary curtain aside. Behind the veil stood Delilah, her head arched by the glittering wings of the cherubim in the distance. Her dress and head-dress were white but a black mantle still clung to her shoulders.

Samson stood on the lowest of the three steps that separated them and hesitated,—not from lack of desire but from fear that it was but a dream. There was something too wonderful in her being there to dare risk it all by a touch. But she raised the veil and he sprang quickly up to her.

The last candle in the vestibule died and their lithe young bodies in noble perfection stood like sculpture against the violet haze, with the silver overdoor above them and the purple curtains on either side. He held her thus for some time, then dragging her head-dress off with one hand he dropped her cloak to the floor with the other. Passing his fingers through her hair that fell unbound at his touch he essayed to speak, but no sound came.

* * * * *

“I have dreamed of seeing thy hair, Delilah—of touching it,” he finally murmured.

She smiled at him tremulously, controlling her quivering voice and limbs with a great effort. “Hadst no eyes for it that night?” she answered, with apparent lightness.

“I know of no night save this.”

She bowed her head under the splendor of his look but made another brave attempt to still her quick, hard breathing.

“Couldst forget a night when I first saw thee—when I helped thee? Thou gavest me thy knife!”

"'Twas well mine eyes were blinded that once," he mused, still stroking her hair, "else had I not seen the lesser light of a fire of straw and cedar."

"Then have I loved thee the longer!"

"Thou feelest it so?" he asked, taking her face in his hands, searching her deep eyes.

Smiling, she closed them and fear went as endurance gave way. The flame on the distant altar flared, reflected its light on her face and he turned still holding her. The cherubim seemed in an instant to crouch and the wing-tips bent until they almost touched. He drew her closer to him and she laid her head on his shoulder, the soft black hair settling against his throat.

It has been found even in the experience of the most thoroughly oriented that sometimes a mass of buried and perhaps forgotten superstition will respond with pristine vigor to the call of the proper stimulus. Knowledge, experience, wisdom amount to nothing beside the force of this long-derived instinct. Under such conditions, without pretense or insincerity of any brand one may pronounce the word he has denied and do the deed he has proscribed. So Samson, wholly forgetful of his reasonable explanation to Bamah, grasped Delilah convulsively and pointed to the bending cherubim.

"See!" he exclaimed. "The wing-tips! They touch!"

"What mattereth that to me?" she answered, with

out opening her eyes; smiling, as she drew closer to him. "Our lip-tips touch."

He buried his cheek on the pillow of her hair and watching the cherubim with fascinated gaze saw the topmost feathers of gold slipping past each other's points; saw them catch—and hold.

"See, they lock" he breathed—then pushed her a little away from him. "Delilah—the wing-tips lock!"

But she looked up into his face serious, confident, in nowise afraid. "What mattereth that to me?" she answered, again.

He took her to him at this with a deliberation that radiated power of will and spoke slowly as one proclaiming judgment.

"It giveth sign of thy fate and mine. The sanctuary doors open not to-night."

"That none may go out?"

"That none may come in," he answered, failing to sound to her depth.

Delilah drew her breath with a long inspiration, drawing a little away from him, dreading that at last he might not measure up to the full stature of her need. But he thrust her off at arm's length and held her there.

"Art mate of mine, thou Delilah of Philistia?" he demanded sternly.

She threw his arms down proudly. "Else had I not come, thou Samson of Israel!"

BOOK IV

THE PASSION

CHAPTER I

Perhaps the most surprising thing in human experience is the rapidity with which we adapt ourselves to new conditions of mind and new phases of physical environment. As long as the inner scale of justice hangs true, as long as one has committed no deed that shocks the innate, human idea of goodness the arrows of rose-and-gold dawn shoot as gayly into the violet shadows: the twitter of newly awakened birds just as truly arouses in the heart joy and gratitude and a swelling affection for all that lives, as if no revolutionary, never-to-be-forgotten thing had dropped into the current of an hitherto normal existence. This holds true, no matter how great the transgression of a written law, which was formulated perhaps for dead and gone generations or at least for the control of the lesser spirits.

There are two motives in human doing: the preservation of the individual and the reproduction of kind. Whatever other divine attribute may be found in humanity, these two impulses unquestionably take

first rank and man is great and good and God-like only in so far as he follows in the path of these two purposes, unerringly.

Unavoidably, during the course of history, a vast and even disproportionate accumulation of derived and accessory desires have developed as aids of the furtherance of the race's purpose. By the lesser souls is meant the frightfully great number of persons that constantly bargain for knick-knacks at the counter of life: that have learned to be quite content with the satisfaction of the merely accessory desires which in such instances are wholly lacking in virtue since they fail to bring about the primary ends of nature. And those persons, also, come into this class of lesser spirits that, not wholly missing the goal, dwarf the outcome by spending their lives in a petty, useless elaboration of the means.

Thus it was that Samson walked the dawn-streaked streets of Sorek with peace in his heart, the morning after the espousal of Delilah. So strong were his primary impulses, so true his human instinct, so wholly subordinate was the individual in him that he gave no thought to the probable disaster to his career, to the probable forfeiture of his influence—to the almost inevitable reckoning with the Philistines. He marveled only, that it was all true: that he could so far yield to her judgment as to take her back to her father's house; and—he was shocked to find a keen hunger assaulting his vitals.

Occasionally a piece of cast-off foot-gear, a club or a half-consumed brand attested to last night's disturbance. Overhead was a purple, velvet sky, flushed with scarlet. Around him were straight, clean walls, showing lavender in the half light and bending over them were dark green masses of leaves, shedding spent blossoms on his head.

Clusters of noisy birds flew in front of him and he thought with a pang of the doves he could not feed this morning. Then his sadness was dispelled by the gladness of remembering Delilah and a certain surprise that he could forget her for a moment. Beside the birds, no moving thing had broken the solitude of the deserted streets, until that moment when a little figure dashed around the square of market stalls, swinging his arms and running in childish exuberance of spirits.

Samson bethought him of the curly-haired lad who brought him his simple meals in a basket of reeds and he quickened his pace involuntarily as he remembered the goat's cheese, the new milk and the sweetened barley-cake under the white cloth that were awaiting him on the hook at the north gate. He had eaten nothing the night before; there would be two baskets, he considered and surely he could empty both! He had forgotten the boy and rediscovered him only when they were close upon each other. Merely a breechcloth covered the child—sandals and the gaudily striped coat were both lacking.

"Tabor, lad, where goest thou?" he questioned as the breathless boy ran into him.

"I seek thee," he jerked out, "I bid thee in all haste, get thee to the house of Chidon?"

"Is it well with Chidon?"

"'Tis Bamah that requireth thee," the boy answered evasively, and darting down a narrow street, sped on ahead.

He was waiting, however, for Samson as the low, white-walled house of Chidon was reached. A narrow door was cut in the otherwise blank face of the dwelling and Samson started as he noted a branch of cyprus stuck in the symbolic carving of the lintels.

"Thou didst not speak of illness. In this——" Samson pointed to the cyprus bough. "Do I come too late?"

"'Tis for Chidon."

The boy disappeared in the dark passage. Samson followed hardly less quickly and after twenty paces, stepped into a small, paved court. Opposite him a great, square window, unshuttered by lattice and undraped by curtain, gave view of the room in which Bamah lay. His bed was made on a simple bench and the orange-colored linen of the mattress threw an unnecessary ghastliness over the poor, old face. About the room, a dozen muffled figures mumbled prayers. One person stood by the bed of the dying man. As Samson entered, she drew back her veil.

"Manasseh!" he gasped.

"Bamah is the child of my mother," she exclaimed simply and Samson knew her instantly for one of the number of Hebrews, mostly women, who when the revolution came, dropped all connection with their people: most of them for reasons of expediency, but others because of strong personal ties in families of the Philistines.

Manasseh's justification needed no presentation to Samson and he questioned her eagerly concerning the sick man. She had been called, she said, half-way between midnight and dawn and even then both Bamah and Chidon lay stricken. The house and court had been filled with terrified Jews but Bamah had sent them away, keeping near him only those who were to hear his testament and to see to its fulfilment. That concerned Samson, she declared.

The eyes of the sick man opened and Samson saw in them the sanity of death; but though the thin lips twitched, his tongue would nevermore form a syllable. Chidon had had no moment of reason in which to recognize his friends, Manasseh went on to say, but spent his last breath in shrieking what Bamah only understood.

The latter, however, fighting the numbness that stole so surely over him with tremendous will and frequent draughts of bitter wine had made it clear to Manasseh in the presence of witnesses what she should say to the judge of Israel, and now while the dying man had

ears to hear, Samson must receive the testament and swear his oath.

The rising sun lighted every corner of the small, bare court and drove the shadows from the room as Manasseh fulfilled her obligation. In the next apartment, the dead servitor lay under his sheet of bleached linen and the small boy kept guard. Once the lad crept to the window and peeped in but drew quickly back as the staring faces of the mourners came into view. Once a tame goat put its shaggy head in at the door but no sound disturbed the reception of the voice that went so faithfully over the details of Bamah's testament. Manasseh knelt at the bed's head and laid her lips near the dying man's ear. Samson sitting where Bamah could most easily see his face, nodded understanding, acquiescence and promise, line by line.

Scarcely had she finished speaking when they saw Bamah's jaw drop but until certain keys and charts had been laid in Samson's hand the bright old eyes did not lose their look of consciousness. Then Manasseh wiped the sweat from the seared, yellow forehead and gradually a film gathered between the half-open eyelids.

As Samson stepped out to the street again, he was conscious for the second time in his life of shock, of a disrupted something within, that needed time and thought to become reconciled with the other part of him. He knew now how near the Jews had stood to

a hopeless sacrifice of their privileges and even of life. Out on an oasis in the desert, away from the beaten path of caravans yet not so far from Sorek, were scores of camels, and provisions for thousands to last many moons. In a secret chamber in the temple was money—bags of gold—and the reason why the tax came so hardly this year, flashed upon Samson.

Just what different causes led to Bamah's abandonment of the enterprise had not been made clear. The dying man had again and again asserted that in death he had seen things as life had failed to present them to him; that the time for exodus was past; that Samson would know what to do with the camels and the gold; that Samson alone could reconcile the people to the failure of their immediate hope; that the final deliverance had begun.

The nearest thing to fear Samson had ever experienced, stole over him when the solemn obligation—so indefinite yet so weighty—was laid upon him. He tried to reason as he sped to the temple just what it should mean, in action, to him. Should he divide the gold among the Jews? But it had been in collection for years and the complications of justice would be endless! Should he hold it until a time of need, when perhaps the allotted tax could not be met without great effort and privation? If only he knew what Bamah meant by saying it would become clear to him what he should do—that through him, deliverance was begun!

But he was faint from lack of food and the basket on the hook at the north gate of the temple was a welcome sight. There was one only, however and this had lately come for the barley-cakes steamed sweet and warm through the napkin. Only an hour of the new day had gone and he ate unhurriedly on the door step, trying to realize what the temple would mean without Bamah whose petulant exactions seemed infinitesimal now beside the great debt Samson gladly acknowledged he owed to him. There would be the double burial, the ordaining of the new servitors and—ah, well! Each hour would bring its own work and he must straightway to Mesech.

He opened the gate and was hurrying through a smaller room to the vault where the tribute was stored, but stopped in dismay. On a bench were the basket of reeds and the napkin that had evidently been sent to him the night before. The bread was gone and so was the cheese but an overturned jar discharging a mass of discolored curd, and two swollen, stiff rats told their tale.

Samson did not realize for whom the milk was tainted in the agony of apprehension as to who might have drunk of it beside these little gnawing pests. For a moment his brain whirled; he could not remember and then in a flash the death of the two servitors that everyone had taken as a natural event, became clear to him.

The two old men had sat at the north gate late in

the evening and it being past their meal-time had eaten of the cheese and the bread and had drunk of the tainted milk. But who could desire the death of Bamah? Who could hate or fear Chidon? A ray of light crept up on the board and suddenly Samson remembered his obligation to Mesech. Come life or death the tribute must go to Gaza so he hastily flung it all—napkin, poisoned milk and carrion flesh—into a cesspool and went to the treasure vault. One bag yet lacked its count and emptying a pouch at his side into the half empty receptacle, he tied it, counted them all again and securing the door took the nearest route to Mesech's house.

CHAPTER II

Of the three men who went plunging down the hill at the head of the soldiery in the foggy half-darkness, Mesech alone felt some degree of relief at the outcome. He could not, on consideration feel great distress at his daughter's infatuation. A journey to Gaza and a glimpse of court life would soon settle the troubled current of her youthful humor; would soon demonstrate the utter impossibility of such an alliance, he argued, even though he himself, must acknowledge an irresistible attraction in Samson and confessed himself glad that he had not been obliged to do violence to the half-confidence that existed between himself and the judge of Israel.

The two men back of him, riding with their horses neck and neck were for the first time in their lives at one in their sentiments. To each, Samson with his admixture of proud humility and conscious power was a growing menace that demanded instant curtailment. Each, weary with futile efforts, wholly disheartened at the impossibility of getting at the matter officially, despairing finally of Mesech's doing anything more than the fulfilling of the letter of the law as regarded the tribute, swore solemnly to rid himself of what had become to each a festering thorn.

At the parting of the ways, Mesech halting, turned to Jezrah.

"At noon, there arriveth a caravan from Kirbar, bearing word of certain shepherd companies much interested in our state. Since our converse beareth directly on the matter of stores and beasts of burden, I pray thee lend us thy countenance."

The message was weighted with unusual deliberation and dignity that it might weather the storm of impatient question that distorted Jezrah's face as the soldiers collected back of them and the torch-bearers gathered about Mesech. When the latter ceased speaking, the Captain broke out in almost inarticulate exposition which Mesech met with an increased show of mastery.

"Let the tribute be started on the road to Gaza Jezrah, and our senses, freed from this responsibility, will set themselves to solving the riddle of the spy. There is no danger at present besetting us but that the fanatic Jews may cram their gold down their throats and offering themselves as sacrifice to their God, be lost at last to Gaza.

He laughed unpleasantly and signed to the soldiers to fall into line. "Wait until the tribute be started, Jezrah," he said again.

At that, the Captain and his two men plunged down a street to the west gate. Mesech and Abdul rode silently into the sleeping town. Street after street was covered by them but no voice nor foot-fall was heard nor sign of human being was granted them. Finally the market-place and Mesech's house came

into view. As they reached the roadway in front of the great doors, Ahab darted from the shadow and grasped Mesech's bridle.

"I pray thee, go into the khan," he whispered excitedly, "there sitteth one asleep on a bundle of skins and if I be not astray in mind, 'tis the astrologer!"

"Thou hast delivered wrong account—nay, even false report—aforetime this night," Mesech answered sternly. "Mind thee, lest thou offend again!"

"Nay," and Ahab's manner made equal impress with his words, "'tis indeed the astrologer, who bespoke us fair and then refused thy courtesy."

"Is a man bound to eat bread he doth not crave, to sleep where it likes him not?" Mesech answered evasively, both to draw what other information Ahab might have and to think how it best suited him to secure the Assyrian. But Ahab pulled the governor down near him with an earnestness that condoned the familiarity of the act.

"A woman who serveth at the khan hath told me that this astrologer hath worn two faces and in one that doth not now appear, he stood in the shadow of the north porch of the temple of Jahveh at sundown: that twice as he ate, he stopped to speak covertly with Jews!"

"Then 'tis a woman who starteth this cry of spy. Why had she——"

"Hear me out, I pray thee. A company of travelers

sat at supper and they passed a skin holding yet a measure of wine to a young man of the Jews. Never had his lips nor the hair of his head been shaven, neither had he tasted wine before, so when the madness of the drink took hold on him, he arose and in a loud voice boasted of Assyria's friendship: told of the spy!"

"Pointing out the astrologer?"

"Nay, with blinded eyes he laughed and fell where he stood."

"And the astrologer?"

"He sat eating and drinking, minding no man save those two only who spoke with him. A woman's wits worketh fitfully, but in a flash; and now she ran to tell me."

Mesech had kept his eyes on the lighted space before him, noting the servants and stragglers that passed back and forth, weighing, determining all the while he seemed only to listen. When Ahab ceased speaking he turned to Abdul, who in courtesy had withdrawn when the servant approached.

"There sitteth," he explained, not adverse to taking to himself credit for this fortunate accident, "on a bag of skins in the khan the Assyrian spy, nodding over his meal as if he were an honest traveler. Thou and I stand at either gate with an half-score men while two whom I shall call will bring him forth to us."

At daybreak, Ahab easy on the score of his exaggerated account of the disturbance at midnight, sat

before the door of the stone cell that held the Assyrian in ward. He knew the strength of that prison but a cold sweat broke over him when he remembered the terrible looks the captured man had cast about him as he lay on the floor bound by strong hempen cords. In the struggle there had been to take him, his turban had been unrolled and tiny bits of polished earthenware, apparently mere ornaments, had fallen to the floor and glittering in the firelight had attracted Abdul's attention.

The spy had betrayed by his manner that these were of unusual value to him and when he was at last secured and carried away, the pieces of pottery were carefully gathered up. For two hours the spy lay glaring and speechless in the guard-room of Mesech's palace, senseless alike to the offer of great bribes and to the torture of fire and sword-thrusts. At last they desisted in their attempt to learn of his mission or the degree of his success in accomplishment and shutting the captive in his stone cage left Ahab on guard.

The light of the new day crept along the straight, rough walls and the warmth of the sun stealing over Ahab made him drowsy. For a moment he slept and dreamed of Selma—dreamed that her white veil was winding about him: that she, in malice, was drawing it tighter and that he was dying for want of breath.

With a great effort he strove to throw her off and awoke. He had slipped from his stool on which he sat and his turban had fallen over his face. A ring of

laughter greeted him that sent his blood bounding and in a mixture of embarrassment and joy he tore away the dusty folds. Before him, with a full pitcher of milk and a wood platter of smoking cakes, stood Selma, her black eyes and white teeth flashing in the morning sunlight.

"Ha! 'Tis so thou keepest guard!"

He started in amazement. Was this the timorous Selma he had left barely two moons ago? Was this the maid whose conquest he had planned—had sworn to as he lay out on the hills in the north, under the stars?

"Ha! 'Tis thus thou greetest a soldier!" He rewound his headgear with what lightness he could assume, in the stress of his discomfiture.

"Soldier," she gibed. "Huddled on thy stool, like a sleepy porter! If thou art a soldier, then shall the women of Sorek be called to guard the border!" She set the jug down with such a jolt that she splashed the foamy milk about her. "Mesech bade me say thy watch is relieved shortly," and she flung herself out of the room.

The sweetened cakes lay unnoticed on Ahab's knees so dumbfounded was he at the change in Selma. From savage boasting to pagan threat he had rung through all the forms of wooing known to his class and now, though he felt the half invitation in her manner, he had no idea how he should go about to obtain her. That she should herself bring his food was significant

that she wished to see him, but why had she left him with no peace between them? The long wait had sobered his wildness without lessening his desire for her, but this vision of her—flashing, scornful—and yet in its very appearance inviting, renewed his determination and beset him with an hundred plans to surprise her. So lost was he in thought that he jumped to his feet in dismay when Samson raised the latch and bounded into the guard-room.

"I am past my time. Hath Mesech waited?" he questioned.

"He cometh but now."

The latch raised again and Abdul followed Mesech into the room. In spite of their fresh toilets both men looked haggard and worn and the bits of baked earthenware Abdul carried in his hands had told no tales.

"Is the tribute ready?" Mesech spoke in a voice dulled with fatigue.

Samson handed him a great iron key and a packet of tablets. "'Tis tied into bags—ready to lay on the beasts."

"Hast seen to the count, thyself," Abdul asked, watching him intently.

"I have told it over and over again: of a surety there is no mistake."

A groan sounded from within the gaol and Mesech seizing Ahab's cloak stuffed it into the narrow aperture high in the door and signed the servant to with-

draw. Then taking the bits of tile from Abdul he held his hands full out to Samson.

"What dost make of these?"

Samson passed them slowly from hand to hand, back and forth, and for an interminably long time it seemed to the other two men, no gleam of interest or expression of any sort showed that Samson performed aught but a mechanical gesture as he passed the trinkets back and forth before his eyes.

All at once he stopped his motion and studied the heaps intently. Then placing those in his right hand along his left arm against his breast, he looked at a star-shaped bit, examining it eagerly, his thin nostrils quivering with excitement. He laid it on the heap and choosing another placed the two side by side. Then he sprang across the room and dropping to the floor began rapidly to sort the pieces and laying them on the stool, fitted one to the other.

The two men watched with breathless interest and soon a diamond-shaped tile formed itself in outline, its sutures evenly joined showing little trace of the fifty and three pieces composing it. For another age, it seemed to them, he studied the cipher and then with a long sigh looked up.

"I will read it for thee," he said to Mesech.

They bent over him, his bronze hair brushed on either side by their turban curtains, following his finger as they listened to his slow, clear translation.

First there was greeting from a person high in authority who was not named to the Jews held in Sorek. Then came an account of prosperity, of liberty, of great property holdings and certain influences at court, followed by direct promises to be fulfilled when the exodus should be effected.

Samson stopped, looking up, and Mesech noted his finger had not yet traced all the hieroglyphic.

"To whom are these writings addressed?" broke in Abdul.

The priest's face paled a little: a spasm of pain swept across his brow. "Bamah and Chidon, bearers of the ark," he answered sadly.

"Then are these Levites to be held to account for their treasons," declared Mesech.

"Who art thou that should hold dead men to account?" Samson burst out.

"Dead!" ejaculated both men in a breath.

"Dead. Bamah died as the sun arose, his brother had gone a little before." Samson's hands dropped from the tile and a sense of desolation and grief possessed him.

Birds twittered in the lattice and the sound of ordinary human beings at domestic duties came into them and for a few moments no one spoke. Mesech began to feel again that he was fighting something more than human forces and fighting blindly. Abdul wondered why an overwhelming interest in what Samson would say or do next invariably possessed him to the

exclusion of all other considerations, when they were face to face.

"But thou hast not finished the reading of the tile," Mesech reminded Samson, recovering himself.

"That concerneth only myself." Samson answered without interest.

"Then it of a certainty concerneth us," Abdul commented and Mesech ordered the reading of the tile completed.

Samson turned again and laying his finger where he had broken off the deciphering, went on. "Thy priest, who impedeth our motion, shall come at the head of thy army as leader or thou shalt slay him on thy altar as a peace-offering to thy god whose eyes are turned from him." He read as by rote, no particle of feeling appearing in his voice.

"Traitorous cowards!" Mesech shouted, shocked at the Assyrian's cool assumption of what he had not been able to bring himself to contemplate with ease. "This day do I send against Assyria that which shall speedily and without fail undo her! Horse and foot, with engines of war——" but he stopped at that. No need for Abdul's cynical smile to remind him that every available man and beast and bushel of grain had been sent to the border already. In an instant his wrath flew to another object.

"But who shall pay for camels and corn—who shall buy me the mercenaries to teach the Assyrian his place? Who shall pay for these, I ask thee, Samson?"

But Samson, disconcerted by the sudden turn, shocked by the display of uncontrolled anger, held his peace. "The Jews shall pay, I tell thee! 'Tis mere justice! Who but scheming Jews have set the Assyrian dogs on the peace of our tranquil Sorek? Who but Jews have plotted to betray us to our ancient enemy and" he bent toward Samson—"who but Jews shall furnish the gold that shall presently undo the harm of their traitrous practice!"

"Two dead Jews stand under thy penalty. Thou canst ask naught of them. Of the living who can say which is guilty!" Samson answered hotly.

"I hold the Jews to account," Mesech spoke a little more coolly, seeing advantage to himself in what he had conceived in anger, "for the moneys wherewith to undo the damage of their plottings."

In a flash Samson remembered what he had strangely forgotten, the oasis in the desert where the camels, and corn in plenty were hid—the cellar in the temple of which he alone had the key. It hung in a pouch at his belt with a map of the desert and the accounts handed over to him by the dying Levite.

Could this be what Bamah meant? Should he be able to buy forgiveness for his foolish people with this treasure? Would they take their lesson and be content with the degree of freedom they enjoyed in Sorek if he could, by the sacrifice of this garnered wealth restore them the toleration they had themselves forfeited or lost through Bamah?

His cogitations were cut short by shrill cries and the sound of hurrying feet. In a moment the door was burst open and Manasseh with three slaves, staggered into the room. Mesech alarmed at this most unusual want of self-possession in his woman-servant hurried to her.

“What hath befallen?”

Manasseh, out of breath, dropped away from him apparently wholly unable to speak intelligently. The other servants shouting, contradicting each other at last made it known that the mistress's leopard, choking on a bone, had in a rage of pain burst his bars and escaped. Search was being made in the house, they asserted, but it surely must be that the animal had jumped through a window or into the well.

It was some moments before Mesech could restore enough calm to the excited slaves to impress them with his orders. Meantime Manasseh had edged nearer to Samson. As the frightened menials turned to depart, he felt a bit of parchment thrust into his hand and he was able to read it hurriedly under cover of their leave-taking. A moment later when he would have hidden it within his pouch, he found that the bag with the chart, the key and the accounts was gone!

“How shall the Jews whose bounden tribute came so laboredly supply thee with the means to fight the Assyrian?” Abdul demanded of Mesech in reminder of the business in hand, when the door closed behind Manasseh.

"They shall sell their houses," Mesech answered, in a hard voice looking at Samson, "they shall sacrifice their business; they shall give me their jewels of gold; they shall offer for barter their stuffs and their furnishings and their slaves. Of their beasts I shall take what is needed!"

Samson saw in a flash what such persecution would mean to his people. He grasped at his pouch and remembered that it was not there. Truly Manasseh had safe-guarded the keeping of her instructions!

"What is it thou wilt buy when thou hast sold the Jew's house, his furnishings and his jewels?" Samson asked.

"Camels and corn."

"Camels and corn shall be thine, enough to satisfy an army if thou wilt accept them as payment for thy loss by the Jews to Assyria."

"Where hast thou camels and corn?" Abdul inquired skeptically.

"There lieth on the trackless bosom of the desert, a grassy spot with wells of sweet water and palm trees. In that place Assyria hath gathered her beasts and provender of war. I could mark thee the spot of these treasures and I do it if thou wilt forgive Israel her debt to thee."

"Thou child!" Mesech retorted, "I will find it for myself and all the more bleed thy people for thy impudence!"

"Not in seven moons couldst thou find it," Samson

answered coldly, "and in seven days Assyria will draw them thence, if they are still in that place."

"Under torture of lash and of fire wilt thou open thy lips, and tell me the spot ere seven hours are past," Mesech threatened with a smile.

"Never will I tell thee, if thou forgive not Israel."

Mesech looked at Abdul and the latter signaled acquiescence. Abdul knew the trickery, the endless innuendo, the evasion that would result if the Jews were even to agree to the outrageous demand. He knew that, on cooler judgment Mesech would not put Samson to torture; that the most he could gain would be the Governor's sanction to a plan of his own. He laid a hand with meaning pressure on Mesech's shoulder.

"Let not thy zealous impulse override thy reason, good Mesech," he said smoothly. "If the Jews but furnish camels and corn enough, methinks they pay their debt to Sorek. Moreover, if thou takest away their means of lucrative earning at this time, whence cometh the tribute next harvest? Only rich Jews pay fat tax, Mesech, so let the priest have his way."

Abdul turned to Samson.

"Write thy chart of the desert, Samson, and presently we send Jezrah who shall bring us safe that which forgives the debt of Israel!" He took from his bosom tablets of polished ivory and a charcoal pencil and handed them to Samson, but the latter waited.

"Thou hast not answered," he reminded Mesech.

"If there be camels and corn enough—I agree," the Governor answered sullenly.

Samson sketched the eastern gate of Sorek, the caravan track and finally, off to the north the spot of the oasis.

"If this be not true—if there be not camels and corn enough, Israel's debt is not paid," he answered as he handed the chart to Mesech. "A journey of two days wins it," he added.

"Now that Israel is forgiven," Abdul said blandly, "there appeareth little cause for unrest. Assyria shall be sent howling into her own kennel; the peace of the Jews is bought with a price and we have under ward the spy that shall invite no more contention."

He stopped and looked at Samson but the latter apparently did not understand the reference to the spy's being captured.

"What emissary Assyria sends to do violence to the state of Sorek, is held to account at Gaza. Clear explanation of our peculiar case is demanded; both sides must speak." He looked at Samson. "We hold it meet, Samson, that thou and I go to Gaza with the prisoner!"

"The prisoner!" Samson exclaimed not yet awake to the situation.

"Even the Assyrian spy. He lieth bound with cords, safe at last! Thou and I go to guard him and the tribute unto Gaza!"

Mesech opened his mouth in astonishment but Abdul

motioned silence with an imperative gesture. "In Gaza, Samson shall have full justice done him—for his camels and corn!"

Samson turned to Mesech shocked only that the spy had at last been taken, not realizing at this moment the demands made on himself. "Where hast thou the prisoner—the Assyrian spy?"

"Here!"

Mesech flung open the door of the gaol. Then he dragged the miserable man out into the light. His eyes unaccustomed to the strong sunshine squinted, were lowered and fell on the diamond tile. With a scream, he threw his head back and stared at the men before him. Suddenly the identity of Samson seemed to dawn upon him.

"Thou hast eaten of the seven poisons," he gasped, fastening his eyes on the priest, "and yet thou livest! Hast thou broken thy fast, this day? Why art thou not dead?"

Then Samson understood and sprang at the Assyrian, only to fall back from the prisoner when he perceived the ropes, that crusted with blood, cut into the spare, brown flesh.

"I had not broken my fast of thy meat," Samson answered, his voice trembling with grief and fury, "because Bamah and Chidon and two swollen rats attest the might of thy seven poisons!"

With a snarl the spy flung his body at Samson, biting at his bonds, flinging blood and froth about him.

In a trice, Mesech had pushed him into the gaol and secured the door again. Abdul kicked straw over the unclean spots speaking for the fury of the Assyrian. A bell sounded through the court and Mesech with a start turned to Samson.

"I leave thee here with Abdul, who shall instruct thee minutely concerning thy mission in Gaza. I go to prepare a beast and a guard for the spy. Wilt thou speak with me a moment apart, Abdul?"

Samson dropped to the stool, appalled anew at the fate of the Levites: still indifferent to what was required of him. Outside the door, Mesech and Abdul conversed in low tones and as he waited, Samson read again the lines Manasseh had thrust into his hand.

"Do thou as it seemeth best to thee with the camels and corn," it ran, "but the treasure in the Temple remaineth for one that cometh after thee."

CHAPTER III

The September midday sun radiated its fervid gold in wanton prodigality over the house-tops of Sorek, causing the languid flowers to droop, taking the life out of new shoots that were so erect in the morning. Ahab stepped from out the cool, darkened stairway and the blinding glare closed his eyes while a quivering shimmer of heat danced over the white floor.

He had slept since day-break: slept as long and sound as men, weary in body and troubled in mind, only may sleep. An absence of the usual impulse to action, a sense of physical completeness filled him. A languid wonder that he had not laid hold on Selma in the early morning; that she had not given her love freely in return, possessed him. It not only seemed possible now; he marveled that they could let the golden moment pass. The heat falling about him relaxed every muscle, his blood flowed easily in its channels—surely life was good!

He sat there absorbing the virtue of the sun, quite forgetful of all else until steps below reminded him what he had come to do. Even then, he sauntered to the awning, so imbued was he with the natural and unconscious dignity of manhood and he stretched

the canopy's huddled fulness with unhurried movements.

Scarcely had the great carpet been spread and the cushions beaten into shape, when Mesech stood at the head of the stairs. He carried a bit of smoked glass in his hand and standing in the full glare of the heat, searched the town to the north, ever and anon with darkened vision.

Gladly would he have laid his sense of unrest to any other cause than a feeling that he should not allow Samson to go to Gaza. All of his innate, natural notions of justice were clamoring for expression; he believed that he ought to secure to Samson a fighting chance for life and liberty, even though the priest's going to Gaza and whatever that might mean would settle forever the matter of his daughter's infatuation.

As a child Delilah had been wont at times to resist authority with marvelous resource and endurance and then, as if suddenly bereft of desire for the coveted privilege, would give up the demand.

As a woman, he tried to assure himself, her passion could not outlive his patience. As before, a sympathy for his daughter welled within him; a certain approbation of her choice he could not repress—but then it was clearly impossible!

Yet, since it solved matters so finally, why was he not glad that Samson was to go to Gaza!

He turned from the town with a sigh and strove to follow Ahab about his tasks trying to forget for a

while the matter that had robbed him of sleep for many hours and had destroyed his peace of mind for more days than he cared to number. No use thinking more! He could rely as he had always done on the tenacity of purpose of others and on others' promptness in willing when the time for action arrived. He sat thus, idly following his servant's movements, when Abdul came up to him dressed for his long journey.

"Art come with good news? Is all well?" Mesech inquired, scarcely able to conceal his anxiety.

Abdul drew off his heavy leathern gloves and unhooking his mantle smiled with great satisfaction.

"The venture showeth no weak spot. The treasure—gold, and a spy—is started and our priest hath charge of it. A treble tribute for the powers that be in Gaza!"

Mesech sighed again, but the sigh was not wholly born of relief.

"It weareth a look of almost too easy victory," he answered; then turned to Ahab; "Refreshments, boy!" then back to Abdul, "Is it started? By what road?" and he forced himself to look at Abdul's jubilant countenance.

"By the brook, through the town. See! A glint of arms!" He pointed to the right toward the temple of Jahveh.

"Thy glass!" He looked eagerly. "They wind down the hill—are even at the market-place and head this way. Five camels, twice that count of heavy bags—

three steeds of thy best breed, Mesech—and one good riddance in the lead!”

Mesech taking the glass, placed it to his eyes but quickly jerked it down again. “Armor!” he exclaimed. “Hath Samson armor?”

Abdul lifted his shoulders and extended his lips in a trick that he had seemed to forget in Sorek. At the near prospect of being in Gaza again, a certain deference he had always shown to Mesech deserted him and something that might seem even impertinent in a man of less personal dignity, tainted his natural courtesy.

“’Twere well to have an answer for the question that every Jew will ask. So——,” again the thin lips shot out, “he goeth to Gaza, accoutered as a Captain, to be guard over the prisoner and the yearly tribute of Israel!”

Ahab brought iced fruits and sherbet in frosted, silver cups buried in fresh leaves, but this refreshment lay untouched before Mesech.

“Didst note any drawing back from—from the unwonted use of a priest?” he asked and as Abdul looked up in surprise added, “—from the wearing of armor?”

Abdul sipped deliberately, almost insolently, it seemed to Mesech’s over-strained senses. “Aye, he urged he was bound only as to his going, but thy name had weight to reconcile all little differences.” He raised his eyes from his fast-emptying cup and peered

suggestively at his host. "He showed marked respect for thy desire."

But Mesech was beyond the sting of the insinuation and rising, sighed again.

"Necessity bringeth hardship—ha, Jezrah!" he exclaimed as the Captain rushed in upon them.

"This day art thou quit of my service!" the latter ground out between his teeth as with a single jerk he tore off his sword-belt and threw it on the couch beside Mesech.

"Quit!" echoed Abdul, setting his cup down without his usual deliberation and Mesech jumped to his feet.

"Quit of service! Wouldst desert in stress of need?"

"Need! Is need shown in compact of scarce a day set aside? Was it not agreed that an end should be made of this pest of Jews? that I should strike—Mesech, mind thine own words—head and tail? Much need!"

The Captain snarled in fury and disgust but Abdul had quickly recovered and saw in this the miscarriage of his own purpose, did not something quickly neutralize on Mesech's mind the effect of Jezrah's anger.

"Silence!" the envoy demanded. "Thou hast lost sight and memory, Jezrah, of thy purpose in Sorek! Thou art not sent to kill Jews, but to pasture them in peace—to milk them in peace and to send the cream, even ten stuffed bags of gold, yearly to Gaza!"

Abdul's veiled, purposeful eyes played on the anger

of the wild blue ones opposite and Jezrah, honest in his fury, patriotic even in his madness of thwarted love, felt a pang of self-rebuke that he could accuse himself of mixing his own motive of personal advantage and revenge with a righteous hope to serve his state. He answered as one suddenly stripped of his purpose.

"What need was there then, of baiting thy daughter?" he asked, turning to Mesech.

"Threat of insurrection, and of exodus. If the Jews' hands be tied, what need to feed our good resources into the maw of a useless war? Moreover, we wash our hands of blood-guiltiness when we send a dangerous demagogue to his rightful warders in Gaza. His people, not saddened by violent loss, but depressed by lack of leadership will turn again each to his own little round of pursuit. Some lazy, book-fed, cringing Hebrew will step into Samson's shoes and all will be well. We live in peace; the tribute—best evidence of thy strong arm and faithful heart, Jezrah—flows steadily to Gaza. The problem is solved—by men!" Mesech smiled, glad to hear even in his own words how well the project sounded.

"And Samson!" Jezrah cried impulsively, at a loss to see what adequate purpose an hundred miles of desert would effect. Abdul spoke up quickly.

"Is Samson in Sorek, only. At Gaza he is lackey—slave—Jew, but leader of nothing! Take back thy sword!"

He pointed to the belt, but Jezrah, still skeptical of Gaza's power to hold an unwilling man if that man were Samson, refused.

"What! Wilt thou not accept reason? Hast no sense of judgment?" and there was that of rebuke in Mesech's tone that stung Jezrah afresh.

"Aye and of justice. He hath my horse—my pick of men; send thou after him and give him this, likewise!" He waved his hand toward the sword. Abdul craned his neck and looked into the flushed, moody face, with a strange smile.

"Dost need more telling?" He laid a hand on the Captain's arm and drew his head close to his lips. "Samson rideth to certain death! There goeth with him to Gaza that which shall of a certainty convict him of conspiracy with the Assyrian. In ten days thou shalt have again thy horse—thy pick of men, yea, even the head of thine enemy, if 'twill salve thine hurt. I bid thee, take thy sword, Jezrah."

The Captain took his weapon, too beset with his own cross impulses to give heed to Mesech whose trembling limbs refused to hold his weight and who sank in a nerveless, crumpled heap back on the cushions.

Abdul feeling the emotion behind him yet purposefully ignoring it, took advantage of the silence and went still farther. "Thou hast where to prove thy courage," he said to Jezrah as he pulled Samson's chart from his bosom. "This day, other men and

good horses will be in need. Come below and Mesech will instruct thee how we stripped the Assyrian to our own great betterment."

Without looking at the governor, Abdul fairly lifted him to his feet and drew him with them to the stairway. As they stood there a moment, accustoming their eyes to the darkness below, Selma came up the steps trailing a gorgeous shawl and an enormous fan of peacock feathers. Ahab followed not far behind.

"Stay, maid——" and Mesech's voice was feeble—"how goes it with thy mistress this morning?"

"She is in good health and spirits, master!"

Selma's decided, almost snappy tones rang out in marked contrast to Mesech's and he still lingered.

"Will she take the air?"

Selma frowned and swept her open arms over the roof, with a gesture touched by disdain and impatience.

"We arrange for her comfort."

Jezrah had gone on ahead and Abdul drew Mesech with him down the stairway.

CHAPTER IV

Ahab took great care in the straightening of the rugs. Then noting that the strings of the musical instruments were tense almost to the point of snapping, gathered tough, sappy, vine tendrils on which blue, bell-like flowers still remained and twined them about the hot, dry cords. But finally he dropped all pretence of occupation and stood before Selma whose nimble fingers worked with pliant copper wire and a heap of many-colored flowers on a damp, osier mat.

"Thou followest not thy mistress's mood," he began tentatively. Selma dropped the garland she was weaving. "Thy fairness hath gone to pallor and the sadness of thine eyes is grown to misery." He bent over her in real concern and she looked up apathetically.

"Doth my complaint burden the air?"

The clasped hands in her lap pressed hard against each other and her eyes swam with tears.

"For a woman, not to speak is to complain!"

"I am no longer woman," she sobbed. "I am slave!"

Ahab dropped on his knees before her, taking her hands.

"Thou art love of mine! Thou art friend of Delilah!"

Selma burst into tears. "Nay, not that—not that!"

Ahab took her into his arms. A sense of protection, new to this pagan who heretofore had felt only conscious desire, refined his passion and in its sweetness and fullness, he was tasting—a bliss never before experienced. "Dost love me, maid, speak true!" he demanded but with infinite tenderness, and the timorous woman in Selma leaping into maturity in the strength of his love, she laid her willing lips on his.

"I have always loved thee. 'Tis all that remaineth to me now," she buried her head in his shoulder, "but not friend of Delilah—no—not that." She burst into sobs again.

Ahab was masterful in his victory, yet kindly and drawing her head from his shoulder, bade her look at him. "Now," he kissed the tear-wet eyes, "comfort thee, Selma, and tell me what hath arisen. Hast been unjustly accused?"

"Nay," and Selma struggled like a child for composure, "but thou knowest Ahab, each night she hath lain in my arms—restless, sighing and no sleep had come, had I not rubbed her palms and stroked her hair and said what charms I know from mine own people."

She stopped and searching his face, discovered the impulse of a smile. "Art laughing, Ahab? Dost mock my misery?"

He straightened his features instantly into severity.

"Nay, dear love, I smile to save my tears; did I not laugh, should I weep—for sympathy. But how of last night—did slumber fail?"

"I know not. She cometh to her chamber where I lay dreaming——"

"Asleep?" Ahab in the foolishness of love, peered at her through half-open lids suggestively.

"Nay," she answered coyly, "thinking——"

"Of——" He finished the question by opening his arms and she filled them, for the moment forgetting her grievance.

But Ahab was better trained. "And thy cousin," he reminded her, "hath she upbraided thee!"

Selma, apparently wholly comforted took her time in answering, arranging her head-dress with elaborate care, while the sparkle returned to her eyes and a certain, pretty pertness showed at her mouth.

"She teareth off her robe without a word to me: starteth to don another and seeing me—she had not noticed me as yet, Ahab—said in a voice I knew not for hers, so cutting and keen it was: 'Art thou too, thirsty for his blood?' "

"And thou!" Ahab exclaimed, now thoroughly interested.

"I answered not, from fear. Thereupon she lifted me and set me within the anteroom. 'Mind thou obey,' she said. 'Abide thou here—sleep if thou canst until I open to thee. Should Manasseh or any one

knock or call, say—that thou art here and that I am here and that all is well.’ ”

Selma shut her lips with a snap and her eyes shot fire in angry remembrance.

But Ahab hurried her on. “And then?”

“She went back to her chamber—dropped the bar and left me there alone!”

“And opened to thee?”

“When the night was gone. At daybreak, she came out to me saying: ‘Wash my face and braid my hair!’ ” Selma’s lips quivered again. “And I did as I was bid.”

“With no word of the night?”

“No word—nor smile—nor salutation of the morning!”

“Was there a look of illness about her?”

“She was in a tremble, pale—and stayed my hand often to listen, and when her hair was braided, though Manasseh had not come she went to the bath.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.”

“And thou?”

Selma smiled in remembrance of the soldier huddled like a sleepy porter on his stool. “I went to thee!”

“Ah!” He caught her hands and kissed them. “Thou hast made me pay the full price of love—waiting, refusals, taunts!”

“ ’Tis thus thou learnedst to love aright.”

“And so I claim the full reward of love,” he whispered, “and speedily!”

She looked up in mute question.

"At daybreak—to-night it may be; of a surety before the moon is dark, we go to the border."

"Women go not to the border!"

"Nay, but ere I go, I take thee to wife! When Ahab lieth on his soldier's coat in the camp, he will have much to remember—love to rejoice over—wife to return to!"

"And I?"

"Thou shalt have thine own life here; thy fineness in eating, thine ease in lying, sweet scents and pleasant sounds—but—these shall not content thee!"

Ahab's eyes took on a dreamy, far-seeing look and Selma shivered and could not choose but listen.

"Thy hands shall be busy—but they shall take no joy in their work for thy thoughts shall be with thy lord. Thou shalt wonder if he be fed—if his pillow be soft—if the cold rain chill him not! Thou shalt feel his weariness in thy limbs—" But Selma restrained him with a cry.

"I cannot suffer—I want not this love!"

"We may not by wishing or not wishing put it off. 'Tis fate! 'Tis destiny! Passion is satisfied and gone, but love—ah, who would choose to have love?"

He laughed at her dismay and kissed the sunshine back into her face. "And thy mistress—tell me of thy mistress," he urged her, but Selma could not remember what she had and what she had not told.

"When thou didst run from me, didst go straight-way to her?"

"To her chamber, but only Manasseh waited."

"What said Manasseh?"

"Of Delilah? I told her nothing, save only that my mistress went alone to the bath and we sat in silence until she returned."

"Was she cured of her illness?"

"Aye. She was in such high humor and color that even the air about her did seem to glow. Mark thee, even Manasseh who groweth old and grumbleth at frolic, laughed when Delilah laughed. But I held my mouth and when the purple robe with its lillies of silver was hung about her, I went to meaner duties that I might not have sight of her."

"Thou couldst hate thy cousin for one single offence?"

"Not hate but fear. I feared her glitter, her joy—her—"

"Doth happiness harm?"

Ahab was anxious to know what the girl meant, feeling her sincerity. Selma studied a moment, then grasped his wrist.

"Ahab, hast thou stood at the brook where it widens to a deep stream and plungeth in rebellion over the rocks?"

"At Elbeth—yes, 'tis a dangerous spot!"

"Even so. And hast thou not, even though thou wert planted safe on the bank—hast thou not felt

the pull of the water? Hast thou not drawn back and fled, knowing that if thou but stay, soon thou too shalt be even as it is—falling, breaking thy self into bits on the rocks that shatter it?”

“But what is that brook to Delilah? Is there lack in her joy?”

“Not lack, Ahab, but drawing, fascination—intent!” Selma spoke as one possessed. “From the first have I felt it; from the day she knew our Samson have I feared it. I could not laugh as I had laughed—always, I felt the pull of the deep, rushing waters that are in her.”

“I knew thou hadst changed, my Selma, but ’tis thy love—for me and no woman’s purpose.”

“’Tis she! ’Tis she that enticeth me to think on thee! ’Tis she hath stolen my carelessness! ’Tis she hath caused love to tease me! Shall I no more eat in pleasure, shall I not lie at ease!”

Ahab broke off her hysterical raving. “Hush thee, Selma. Thou art beset by fatigue and the call for sleep. Fool was I to tell thee the pangs of love! Better hadst thou learned them for thyself, when thou couldst, remembering thy joy of passion, forgive them.”

His intense, low voice thrilled her, quieting her jangling nerves. “I will teach thee a rapture, dear one, for the moment of which, all thy life with its petty ease and pleasure were willingly forfeit!”

She lay quiet in his arms and once more the billows

of a great, new joy swept over him. This sensitive, pure-minded, innocent child rounded out the missing lines of Ahab's natural endowments. Poetic, sensual, selfish—no woman save this one could have so restrained him; so brought out the sane qualities of his soul. She drew on his mercy, she appealed to his tenderness; she enforced on him a wholesome restraint and he, feeling the force of such righteousness, consciously nourished his budding virtues.

A faint shout, unusual at noon-tide when all Sorek lolled half-asleep under awnings, drew Ahab's attention below to the town and he noted that a camel train was halted at the market-place and that a crowd of townspeople stood about it. But that meant nothing to Ahab—not so much as the light foot-fall that sounded on the stair. He roused the drowsy Selma with a kiss and each sprang to a task. Delilah's laugh floated up to them and in a moment all the sunbeams in Sorek seemed to focus themselves upon the gorgeously arrayed woman, who stood in their view.

CHAPTER V

Manasseh stumbled upon the topmost step and would have fallen had not Delilah in no sense dazzled by the brilliance of the sunshine caught her. Nothing could be more in contrast than the two women who crossed the floor together. Manasseh in her gray and brown robes, with her tired, petulant face and yellow teeth had not drawn the eyes at all, unless the curiously-shaped box she carried, showed from beneath a fold of her cape. The casket was of beaten gold and at the corners and over the top were rows of precious stones.

But one turned from the sumptuous jewel-case to Delilah. Her hair, braided and wound about her temples had only a pretense of a covering—an embroidered band of white and gold from which a filmy veil floated. Over an undergown of shimmering white silk was a gorgeous robe of purple, embroidered in silver and gold with amethysts and pearls set in pattern down the front, around the border—everywhere. The sandals glittered as if she trod on shafts of light and a girdle of wrought gold and precious stones bound her hips and hung to the floor in front.

When she had led Manasseh to the divan, she stepped out into the glare of the sunlight again, threw back her head, raised her arms and stretched them, in pure joy of living.

"Ah, the bright, bright sun and the good, good world!" she exclaimed. Looking about she perceived that Manasseh still stood beside the jewel-box that lay on the couch. "Sit, mother!" she added affectionately.

The man-servant next caught her attention, and she smiled at him. "Ah, Ahab—is it well with thee?"

"More than well, good mistress," Ahab answered, his face wreathed in smiles and Delilah turned her head, bird-like toward him again.

"How, boy! What sayest thou?"

"'Tis more than well, 'tis better!"

"Ah!" She laughed—a laugh of happy elation. "Better! Then, joy of living—'tis best with me!"

Her smile took in Ahab, Manasseh, the shrubs—and then lighted on Selma whose face was hidden and whose shoulders rose and fell with her sobbing.

"Girl!" cried Delilah, and ran quickly to her, "Sweet sister—thou weepest!" She drew the bowed head up to her shoulder. "Thou weepest on this my—my—ah, Selma—Selma!" she pleaded reproachfully as the girl kept her tear-stained face turned stubbornly away.

Ahab slipped over to Manasseh and before the nurse realized what was being done, he was helping

her down the stairs. A lute string snapped with the great heat and Delilah let the maid sob her fill.

"What is it, Selma?" she asked gently, after a while.

"Thou hadst a smile for Ahab," and Selma's voice came brokenly, showing a deep hurt, "kind words for Manasseh, but for me only: 'Wash my face and braid——' " She burst into sobs again and her mistress let her weep until her tears were dry. Then she raised the stained face in her hands reprovingly.

"If thou hadst no trust in me for little matters, my Selma, how may I have faith in thee for concerns of life and death?"

"Thou wert ever, so kind——"

"Aye, but trial is test of tenderness! Listen! I trust thee even as thou hast no confidence in me. This morning—I may not speak of the night—the one I love, even more than thee, Selma—best of all, more than life inself—was in danger, for my sake. That I might not take one chance of hurt; that I might be safe beyond venture of accident, he entered the very halls of—of his enemy, under such seeming that discovery were certain death. When I said: 'Wash my face and braid my hair,' each moment was bringing him to safety. How could I think of thee—how could there be heart in my voice when it was stretched in an agony of fear for him? Not till I went to the bath, did I know that I might breathe again and love life."

Delilah dropped her arms from the girl, drew a deep breath and smiled brilliantly. Selma fell sobbing at her feet.

"My mistress—my——"

"No time for tears!" Delilah raised her with a kiss. "'Tis radiant joy infuseth me! See, Manasseh hath brought the jewels—my mother's jewels! Hast seen them, Selma?"

"Nay," and Selma, humble and tear-stained, strove to accept forgiveness.

"Nor I, except that glass should be between them and me. A maiden of thy people wears no jewels, eh, Selma?"

"Not if she be virgin."

"Strange! This maketh agreement with the testament of my mother, though my father, in grudging disobedience, gave me these, many months past. He thought 'twas due me, but I liked them not."

"Liked them not?" questioned Selma, looking up from the box wherein a glittering heap of stones and wrought gold lay.

"I would not touch them. Should I mock me? See this head-band!" Delilah lifted a triple row of brilliants and emeralds and polished their faultless facets with her veil, then held it off, the better to view it.

"'Tis sign of life perfected! No woman wears this head-band, Selma, unless Love hath kissed her forehead—blessed her hair; unless the head it resteth on hath bent in humble adoration before her lord!"

She flashed the jewels forth and back in the sun. "Should stagnant thought be bound by brilliance such as this? I had no need to think quick, Selma—none to share my thought. Now, I wear it!"

She laid the jeweled band across the masses of her black hair and in exchange of smiles and bright glances with the sympathetic but bewildered Selma, earrings passing wholly around the small pink ears, bands for the ankles, and bracelets were fastened into place.

Delilah stopped to straighten a twisted chain. Selma who had been examining the contents of the box with something more than idle curiosity, started to speak, but with a glance at Delilah, held her peace.

"Ah! See the necklace!" the maid cried finally in her usual tones, holding out a handful of linked gems.

Delilah clasped the chain of jewels about her throat, causing the stones to gleam blindingly by making her bosom heave; and she laughed anew.

"Wouldst have laid it on a sad, heavy bosom, Selma? See! 'Tis air that pilloweth it now! The heart is light—'tis gone—'tis given for love, forever!"

But as she spoke, a wave of loneliness swept over her and she sighed; the smile left her eyes and lips; her hands dropped, unthinkingly into the box, touching a curiously-fashioned ring. She lifted it out.

"And this ring!"

As she held it up to view, Selma sprang forward. The desire to impart the knowledge she possessed, the

longing to force from Delilah some recognition of their relationship had been pressing painfully hard upon her.

"'Tis Jewish!" she found herself saying.

"Then will I wear it!" Delilah answered with determination, pushing the ring half-way on her finger before Selma could stay her.

"Draw it wholly off, I pray thee. 'Tis a pledge—'tis given in token!" the excited girl insisted.

"Who giveth this ring?" Delilah asked, her eyes big with crucial interest.

"The bride to her husband!"

"In token—of what?"

Even here Selma felt she had gone too far, that she must draw back. She looked over the house-top, shimmering in the heat and tried to pull herself away from the spell of the eyes that seemed to be drawing her. But Delilah laid her hands upon the girl's shoulder, commanding both attention and obedience by the tragic concern she betrayed.

"What is this token? Thou must tell me, Selma," she insisted.

"The bride giveth this ring in token," the answer came as if forced yet most reverently, "that his seed shall not die—that a child is begotten."

Delilah slowly drew the ring from her finger and sat holding it with unseeing eyes. Selma, awed by her face, went to the parapet and pretended to look with interest upon the street below, her own heart

strangely moved. Presently Delilah arose and turning to the hill of Astarte, threw out her hands beseechingly, carried away by the stress of her passion to the prayerful impulse of her childhood.

"Thou, Dagon!" she cried, but the very word reminded her that this was no god for her and she turned to the temple of the Jews.

"Thou, Jahveh!" she called but the cold walls gave no sign and she crushed her hands on her bosom. "Nay—dumb gods, all! Mine own heart! Shall I ever give this ring? Ah, happy woman, if in honor—with blast of cymbals and loud acclaim of men, I might bid him wear this ring!"

. . . The flowers and shrubs, the white and green of the town beyond her, even the heavens of Sorek were blotted out, as she stood with her hands crushed against her heart as one who sees a vision. . . .

"That his seed may not die!"

Then a bird flew whirring past her and she dropped mechanically back on the couch. A shout arose from the streets but she sat unheeding, her face sublimated by dreams and hope. Presently Selma who had been leaning for a second over the parapet, in actual interest, drew back.

"Ah, they struggle—poor lad!"

The sharpness of her tone aroused Delilah from her transport.

"Struggle?" She crossed quickly over and looked down. "He motioneth to us—see! Again! Go thou,

Selma—chide the porter, bid him admit the boy! Haste!"

She pushed the half-unwilling maid down the stair-way and stood at the top with tense expectancy. Then, impatient ran to the parapet, looked over again; then back to the stairposts. It seemed an age until Selma should come again but she brought the boy with her, who held his arms clasped tightly over his breast. Selma pushed him toward Delilah petulantly.

"There! 'Tis she—give it her!"

"The Lady Delilah?"

"'Tis she herself—give it her!"

The boy slipped his hand into his tunic, began to withdraw it and stopped.

"Wilt swear thou art the Lady Delilah, daughter of Mesech, first lord of the Philistines in Sorek?"

"Aye, boy—and more!" Delilah answered smiling, holding herself in patience, the more to enjoy Samson's first message to her. "What other should I be?"

"'Tis from Samson. He bade me give it only to thee and to follow swiftly to tell him."

The boy turning suddenly, sped down the stairs.

"Follow swiftly to tell him!" Delilah repeated, holding the parchment with unbroken seal in her hands.

"The scroll—'tis a message for thee—open!"

Delilah ripped apart the folds. "My eyes whirl—I cannot see. What is it? Read for me!"

"Thy father sendeth me unto Gaza to answer for

certain defections of my people, but I return to thee after a little time. Abide thou in confidence till I come.' " Selma read it measuredly, monotonously and Delilah's white lips formed every syllable after her.

"Read again," she demanded hoarsely and Selma began again.

"Thy father sendeth me unto Gaza——"

"Unto Gaza," repeated Delilah aloud, absently and the girl took up her reading again.

"To answer——"

"To death!" Delilah whispered, grasping Selma. "Think, girl! What is to be done? They send him to chains—to certain death!"

"Send one after him."

"Who? Thee?" Delilah's voice usually of such low pitch had raised to a shrill cry, so terrible was the anguish growing within her.

"Nay, Ahab."

"Ahab! Ahab! Ah, yes!" she shrieked, while the pallid circle around her mouth came and went with her heart's beat. "Bid him come back—he must not go—must not go!"

"Is it accident? Who calls?" shouted Ahab, dashing up the stairway and Delilah seized his arm.

"Ah, Ahab! 'Tis worse than accident! 'Tis plot—'tis murder! Run thou after him and say——"

"Him?" Ahab looked in question to Selma.

"Samson," the latter explained.

"—and say, she bids thee turn back. She hath word

of importance——” Delilah reeled in half-unconsciousness but Ahab catching her, shook her gently.

“Speak! What is it I should say?”

“I—I cannot think. That is all—she bids thee turn back to her!” Delilah looked distractedly about and her eyes fell upon the jewel-box glittering in the sunlight. She put her hand within and drew out a trinket and without noticing what she took, handed it to Ahab. “Here take the jewel!”

“I want no wage,” Ahab answered proudly.

“Take it! ’Tis given for him—but go! Bring him back—bring him back!”

In an instant he was gone and though the two women searched the streets anxiously, the crowded houses and groves to the west hid the camel train and the people following it, if indeed it had not already passed into the valley without the gate. Selma stupefied by the sun and the unaccustomed loss of sleep, watched as in a dream the woman who paced the roof with tightly clenched hands and hanging head.

Again the terrible feeling of being drawn into a vortex of irresistible waters possessed Selma. Strange currents of emotion rushed through her and she felt her small, untempered body and her narrow, inadequate soul cry out against the fulness that crowded it. Again fear of that pulsing, tortured woman seized her and when Delilah approached her again in her aimless pacing, Selma fled to the shadow of the canopy, the persistent glitter of the jewel-box guiding her half-

blinded eyes. Mechanically she looked into it and started with dismay—it was empty.

“Ah—the Teraphim!” Selma ejaculated. Delilah grasped the hidden amulets on her bosom. “There remained only the Teraphim,” the Jewish girl continued, frightened beyond the thought of prudence. “Thou hast given Ahab the Teraphim!”

“What mattereth it?” Delilah answered, listening intently at the head of the stairway. Selma burst into indignant protest.

“’Tis the most sacred relic of Israel! By them, war is declared and altars are built! Thou hast given the Teraphim to an unbeliever.”

Delilah faced Selma in dignified reproach.

“Ahab goeth to save a life—my love—Samson for Israel. Is that not more than war, than altars? Meet gift for such service!”

Selma was staring fearfully at the temple, half expecting Jahveh to appear in some terrible manifestation of revenge.

“But it hath no virtue to the unconsecrate,” she moaned, “two pairs only were granted to Israel; the other——” she stopped, her sensitive ears caught by the sound of struggle below.

Delilah, drawn for the moment from her anxious watch at the head of the stairs, by interest in Selma’s words, crossed the roof and stopped beside the girl. She bared her glistening white bosom on which, hung to the tiny chain, Samson’s two Teraphim lay.

"The others——?" she questioned smiling.

"The others are——" Selma began, her eyes still fastened on the temple of Jahveh.

"Here!" Delilah cried triumphantly, pulling the girl's face around, pointing to her bared bosom.

Every muscle in Selma's body stiffened and she stopped breathless, so stunned was she by what she saw. A bird in an oleander beside them, trilled out in full, powerful song flooding the place with melody, the notes billowing over them, shutting out every other sound. When it had finished, Selma turned to the temple and threw out her hands, her voice raised in ancient, racial lamentation:

"Woe unto Israel! Israel is——"

"Here!"

Samson who had entered as the bird sang, finished Selma's wail with a single, triumphant word and folded to his heart, the woman who had bidden him come.

Delilah, quiet for a moment, yielding herself to the joy that his mere presence brought, did not note that her maid crept away with a white, blank face. She laid her cold fingers on Samson's forehead, on his eyes and pressed his hands again and again, to reassure herself that the horror of destruction was past. His sunny smile, so frank and unafraid, reassured her more than all else, but she gasped in foreboding.

"Thou art not gone! Tell me," she partly freed herself from his grasp, "tell me thou wilt not go!"

Samson, smiling, took the glittering, bejeweled face between his hands.

"Not obey the first behest of my—of thy father?" he asked and in his sparkling, happy eyes there rested no shadow of suspicion.

"My father—but, first of all, master of Israel! Go not to alien ground! Leave off their vestment!"

She pulled away and looked him over from head to foot, as if to locate the menace that seemed to exhale from his strange costume. The silver-bound boots met breeches of linked steel, as pliant as leather, but impenetrable to arrow and sword-thrust. About the loins and over the arms, were plates of steel, riveted to strong leather and a helmet of stretched skin and steel covered all of the face but the eyes: A shield, large enough to protect the entire trunk, hung at his back.

Delilah had often divested her father of such as this and with a twisting jerk, she opened the corselet. He allowed it all to slip to the floor and when he stood, covered from his waist up with only his linen tunic, she put her arms about him and smiled up into his face.

"So! Thou shalt never touch their war-gear nor leave me again!"

The tunic against which she lay was damp and

exhaled a clean odor of a human body, not of bodies in general but of one she would know from all the world. It soothed, reassured her and she raised her head to look at him again. Down, her gaze traveled from the damp, white forehead with its cluster of bronze curls to the square, firm chin, the fair neck marred still with the pressure of the corselet, the broad, high chest falling and rising with his deep breathing, the shapely waist and the narrow hips—but a smear on the meshes of the breeches arrested her gaze.

“Look! ’Tis blood!”

She dropped to examine the spot and as Samson lifted her neither noted that the leopard, blinking in the sunlight, crept in and hid behind a tabourette.

“’Tis not mine,” he assured her, “mine that flows for thee, only.”

“Whose blood?” she queried. “Hast thou fought?”

He threw back his head in a smiling attempt to speak lightly. “One opposed me in the passage-way.”

“And thou didst resist?” The leopard’s tail pounded the floor with irregular, hurried, muffled beats.

“Thou hadst called me—thou hadst sent the Tera-
phim. Either were reason enough——”

“The Teraphim!” she cried. “*I sent thee the Teraphim?*”

“Mine own—see!”

He opened his hand and the amulets lay exposed.

“Nay, here are thine,” she answered laying her hand

on her robe, drawing it aside again, then pointing to what he held. "Those are—were mine!"

Samson's face sobered instantly. "By the holy covenant of Israel," he breathed, "Who art thou? How didst come by these?"

"From my mother."

Samson examined them with care. In size and color and shape the two pairs were identical. He looked up at her, speaking slowly.

"A mystery as great as thou confronts me. What else is from thy mother."

"This!" She touched the head-band but he shook his head.

"Mere glitter to light thy beauty!"

"And this!" She lifted the necklace with one trembling finger.

Once more he looked and shook his head. His poise was returning and he laid his arms about her, smiling again.

"'Tis only mark where I shall rest when love hath sway."

Delilah pulled her hand from between their bodies and shyly displayed the ring.

"And—this."

"This!" he repeated, vacantly staring at the ring.

Pride and tenderness gleamed from Delilah's eyes and when she lifted them to his, Samson comprehended. His arms dropped from her and he fell to his knees with the instinct of worship.

"Delilah!" he cried, in a transport of love and hope, as he caught her hand to his lips, "give it me—give it me!"

Slowly she worked the ring from out her palm, but barely had it touched his finger-tip when she was impelled to look up. Her hand closed spasmodically down over the one beneath it. Farther than that she could not move.

Samson was kneeling with his back to the stairway and behind him stood Jezrah with an unsheathed sword, his arm bound in bloody cloths. Beyond Jezrah in the stairway it was dim but it seemed to Delilah that scores of armed men swayed to and fro in the narrow space.

With a cry, she jerked her hand from Samson and sprang forward, covering him entirely with her body and her robes as Jezrah lunged toward them. In a flash the other men were upon them and though they made efforts to spare Delilah, who fought with teeth and nails, as never an unarmed man could fight, the sword had passed through her arm and Samson was dragged out unconscious from beneath her, with no sign of hurt upon him, save a broad discolored dent above his brows.

Thump, thump the sagging body was carried down the stairs and Jezrah, forgetting for a moment the woman who lay on the house-top in a heap, sped on ahead to gather help in case of Samson's sudden recovery. When the last sound died from below, the

leopard peered cautiously around the base of the tabourette. No movement nor breath of sound deterred him as he stepped out into the open space, away from any obstructing thing.

Straight in his path lay the pile of purple, gem-encrusted raiment but from beneath it stretched a white, blood-besmeared arm and Namur knew what else was there. His tail, swinging in regularly narrowing circles, struck the floor at each curve: the bristles on his back arose: the whole mass of his strong, young legs and body contracted and in a moment, he had sprung and dropped squarely on Delilah's unconscious form.

BOOK V

THE REDEMPTION

CHAPTER I

Samson had often sat at dusk without the eastern gate of Sorek and heard the camel bells, long before the caravan had wound in around the spur of the ravine that allowed it to come suddenly into sight. Surely a pernatal prejudice was to account for the familiarity he felt with the groaning, slobbering beasts; for the keen pleasure with which he viewed the silken scarves and golden gums that came out of the bales in the bazaars.

And so, he experienced a peculiar sense of belonging as he awoke from a vague dream and the smell of the desert fires—the especial tang of burning sand—the odor of sweaty camels and the intermittent tinkling of bells on the necks of uneasy beasts became sensible to him. He knew he was covered in some way, though the air passed freely about him; knew he was shackled in some way, though he moved his limbs freely; knew he could not see about him

although he drew for a moment a thick wet bandage from off his eyes.

He lay back on comfortable cushions and tried to think beyond the parts of his own body, but found himself straying in mind each moment as one who fights sleep. A few seconds or an hour may have passed when he felt himself toppling with a swinging movement. Then there was a thud—a scraping of feet in the gritty sand and then a camel's groan. His hands went out instinctively to feel and in a moment he knew where he was. He was in an improvised pavilion on the ground between two camels and he was chained, perhaps to the beasts as well as to his lodging.

Except for a dull ache and a feeling of fulness in his head he was in no particular discomfort not even in thirst but it suddenly occurred to him that his tunic and the cushions on which he lay were wet; he had apparently been sluiced with water a short time before—perhaps that was why he awoke. Somewhere he could hear voices, but it was only an intermittent murmur and he tried to think how he had come there.

But again he found himself struggling to retain consciousness and a picture of a desert under a low red moon; a dusky line of laden camels dropped like a succession of long brown mounds on the sands, the red lights of watch fires—all these things persisted and he could remember nothing. Then he slept again and

certain happenings of his youth which had befallen him in the terrible days after the revolution came back to him in vivid dreams.

He had not recalled them in months. They had always seemed as if they were the experiences of another person, so at variance were they with his habit of action and his attitude of mind. But it seemed once more that he was being dragged face-down through the filth and with a shudder of revulsion he awoke.

Again he tried to think where he was and who he was and again he saw only a circle of camel-drivers about the fire quarreling guardedly over a game of chance.

Presently voices grew nearer and after muttered imprecations on every duty incident to their vocation, two men settled themselves on their cloaks, their heads pillowed on the sagging neck of a camel, to divide the night between watching and rest. Alternately the wounded man swooned and regained consciousness in a rhythmic effort to recover his physical balance and the enigmatical talk of the two men who lay just beside him had, as yet, little to do with the process. They were a part only of the picture of the great mid-desert, so familiar to his inner sense yet never seen in actual vision.

Suddenly the illusion of the sandy waste faded and he felt himself climbing up, up, up—past countless latticed windows set with polished shell and his arm

ached with a burden. Then it seemed that he was passing through interminable passage-ways with something near him for which he was fearful. Sometimes it seemed like a great white bird, but he could never be sure just what it was.

Then he saw heaps upon heaps of glittering gems the meaning of which he could not discover and the next moment he was a little child again, at work with his tasks and opposite was a yellow, wrinkled face; but he could not recall whose countenance it was. After that the gem heaps appeared again and atop of them was a beautiful mysterious something that came down to him and held him with white arms and he swooned again to blissful half-consciousness.

* * * * *

One of the camel drivers struggling up to a sitting posture after a vain attempt to lie to his liking, accidentally kicked Samson, jolting him into something like sensibility.

"Leopards and Jews!" the man grunted. "They be of a kind!"

A sleepy groan was the only response from his mate but the words rang and rang in Samson's ears, perhaps leaving each time an inappreciable residuum of meaning.

"Leopards and Jews! They be of a kind!" He heard the gurgle of water from an half empty skin

and the scrape of a scantily shod foot along the sand as the drinker poked his fellow.

"Canst sleep when the horror is abroad? If I but close my eyes" he complained, "there appeareth great spotted leopards, with glistening eyes, sliding along their bellies, creeping around every bale—each beast!"

A camel moved suggestively and the other man sat sleepily up. He stretched his limbs and groaned again and then helping himself generously to the contents of the water-bottle, looked about in drowsy, half-understanding of the fear that beset his mate.

"Think what blessings their half-gods grant!" the first speaker went on. "The spy, bound under the law to the court of Gaza—the captive free, slipped from under hand as a bird escapes the fowler!" He lowered his voice a little. "The pouch of Omar is empty! Once our Lord Abdul had filled it with scrolls of precious import. Belike the Assyrian hath in his magic stripped Omar, though Omar's tongue is held. Who backeth this Assyrian? Who rescueth a man bound with thongs, twisted, leathern thongs, wounded sore and weak from hunger? Who worketh such miracle?"

"Jews?" the other guessed lazily, sure of his mark.

"Jews!"

By this time the sluggard was wholly awake, and beat by beat there came to Samson's mind, morbidly sensitive to purely sub-conscious suggestion, the throb-

blings of memory. He recalled that he had started on this same trip with Omar across the desert. He felt his legs—yes, there was the armor he had resisted wearing; but the coat, the helmet,—where were they?

“Mesech is crazed!” the man who had stood with Omar without the guard-room ejaculated. “He sitteth with Minar the stone-cutter in the tomb of his wife and stroke by stroke, must the two hollowed blocks be made alike.”

“Mesech—Mesech—Mesech” pulsed through Samson’s brain and as he searched for a record of his lost armor, a vision of the sun-gilt house-top and the glittering woman came in a flash back to him. Delilah had taken off his armor: Delilah had kissed—his forehead—no, the red lines where the corselet had borne too hard upon him. But his burning fever was fast drying the bandage about his brows and his lips were parching.

“So may the dogs of Mesech eat to their fill,” the man went on, “Jezrah cut the leopard into strips!”

“Jezrah cut——” The two words caught in Samson’s mind and he remembered a struggle. Was it—was it on the stairs with Jezrah? And Delilah! He moaned in his ineffectual attempt to remember aught after her kiss upon his bruises. Then in reply to the smothered sound that reached the camel-drivers, the contents of the flabby water-skin was emptied upon Samson. It struck full upon his thirsty lips and again

a comparative sense of well-being came over him with a renewed power to concentrate his mind on what the men outside were saying. "Jews and leopards!" Ah, he was a Jew!

"It may be the leopard was not wholly unmindful of kindness," the sluggish driver ventured in slow speech. "Mayhap he clung to the woman, in effort to protect her from Jezrah's sword. How doth a leopard know what should be the intent of a man with a knife?"

"Doth a beast that springeth with a leap of many feet upon the body of a woman who hath fed him with her own hands, even caressed him with her kisses and shared her pillow with him——" the driver was entangled in his indignant expression but plowed boldly on: "doth such a blood-thirsty beast spring on that woman, prone and senseless, with intent of kindness?"

"Doth not Jezrah himself aver, that he caught the leopard with his claws only, embedded in the flesh."

"Crushing the tender bones——" corrected the other.

"Even crushing the tender bones," the man accepted, "but in the necessity of impact and of weight, and not of intention! And, mark you, only his nose toyed with the silken veil of her drapery!"

"Silken veil!" the scoffing answer came. "Thick, scratchy, stone-beset pile! What suspicion of trap and mother-got fear of carved metal and crusty gems

would not deter a desert-born beast from instant bite, once he had fastened his prey!"

"What did the leopard when Jezrah sprang upon him?" the other enquired after a pause, in mute acknowledgement of his lost ground.

"He did but growl and crouch the lower on his prey!" the man shuddered.

"And what did Mesech when they brought his daughter dead before him?"

"I know not. When we——" Here the driver dropped his voice and what he said was lost to the wounded man, whose hideously stimulated senses were reeling toward insanity. "The Lady Delilah lay dead, bound in her veil with wailing women beside her and Mesech was directing Minar how the sarcophagus for his daughter should be cut!"

"Was he sheared of his reason?"

"No man is clothed in his reason who leaveth an unwashed, undevoted corpse, to strive with a stone-cutter in a sepulchre!"

"And the Assyrian goeth free!"

"'Tis I that sayeth this, brother, and mark you, thus the matter standeth though Omar, after some private speech with Abdul as we left Mesech's gate, stiffens his neck and spits his words between his teeth, saying: 'The Assyrian is held for reason and goeth to Gaza later with our Lord Abdul. Also is the Jew, Samson, grievously wounded and his mind wanders. Guard him closely to his journey's end!' " The driver

mimicked the pompous Omar with rare facility then added in his own voice, "If I mistake not, the Jew got his hurt in defense of the Assyrian and some culprit or another must go alive to Gaza; but lords and governors took the length of the passage when they give reasons."

He concluded sententiously and as if soothed with the naming of his fears settled himself on the camel's neck again. But this latter wisdom was lost on Samson for in the fulness of understanding with which his flighty but artificially sensitive reception of the words "Jezrah" — "leopard" — "crushed bones" — "daughter dead"—"Lady Delilah" was repaid, his balancing sanity gave way and when in curiosity the drivers looked at him in the early dawn, they found him fever-stricken and mercifully unconscious both of his own existence and even of that of the desert about him.

Day after day the camels swung along in the sun and at each halt cold water was thrown over the stricken man. Sometimes a water-bottle was put to his lips and he drank mechanically, repaying them with moans. No one changed the bandage across his brows and when he awoke in the palace prison at Gaza, weak in body but apparently saved in mind, his first act was to fling the loathsome, rotting thing from him.

They brought him water and he poured it over his face until his eye-lids opened. Again he dashed it over his brows; moved his eye-lids up and down; put

his fingers up to find that it was no muscular delusion —felt the sensitive scar on his forehead but could not understand.

At last the gaoler, not unmoved by the tragedy, laid kindly hands on the panic-stricken prisoner.

“Thy efforts avail thee nothing, boy! Thou art stone-blind to the end of thy days!” he said and turned away.

CHAPTER II

It was early in the evening and the audience room of Mesech's palace had been cleansed and set in order after the excitement of the morning. Jezrah only, sat on a long divan while felt-shod servants with mourning in their voices and in their listless movements passed in and out. The captain, pallid for the first time perhaps in his eventful life, sat with drooping shoulders. His head swathed with many bandages and his arm bound with narrow strips of cedar added grotesqueness to his air of pitiable dejection. The newly-fledged pigeons in the court flew awkwardly to their nests under the balcony and the last, sweet breath of the closing flowers increased the air of solemnity and gave a look of desolation to the deserted garden and the empty rooms.

Presently a door opened across the court and Manasseh and a maid-servant led in Mesech whose feet were uncertain and whose head was hanging. Jezrah rose to aid them but seated himself again at a sign from Manasseh who guided her master to the divan and forced him to lie upon it. Then she stood beside him and in a moment, Mesech was in a deep sleep.

"He hath been with Minar since noontide," the woman explained as she took leave of Jezrah.

The night was now down upon them but no lights were brought and Jezrah listened with longing to the deep breathing of Mesech,—if only he too could sleep! Over and over in his mind went the details of the struggle with the leopard and after a vain attempt to free himself from it all, he found that the scene had possessed him again and almost reconciled at last to his misery, he gave himself up to the self-inflicted torture.

* * * * *

The Captain had suddenly thought of Delilah when he reached the guard-room door with Samson and found Mesech and Abdul with others making fast the Assyrian for his journey. So that with only a knife in his belt for a weapon, he sped back to the housetop to see—what?

A score of times, during the long afternoon Jezrah had closed his eyes, then opened them, but whether he closed them or opened them he could not shut out the sight of the long, sleek, brown and yellow beast lying flat on the woman he loved better than Sorek.

Never could Jezrah forget how the straight, tense tail pressed out behind like a fifth leg nor how the scenting nose hunted, going back and forth over the folds of the garment under which her face lay—nor the cruel, pale yellow claws that pinned her arm to the floor! And the mocking sunshine and the bird's song that poured about it all! He reasoned in a

flash that he must not call for help or wait an instant. Another breath and the leopard, impatient, might take notice of the arm or grip through the cloth with his terrible jaws.

So Jezrah had at him and the blow that should have struck behind the leopard's left foreleg slipped and tore a jagged wound, too low for mortal hurt. Then the struggle began and before the people in the house below, who were intent on Samson's fate, could tell whence the sounds came Jezrah had literally cut the leopard from Delilah's body in strips. Then snatching her from the sight of the palsied crowd that poured in from the stairway, though one of his arms hung useless, as one demented he carried her down the two flights of stairs to the audience room and laid her at her father's feet.

Mesech looked but said no word. Then the servants brought, in a basket that dripped blood at every step, all that was left of Namur and the father looked at that as well. Still he spoke no word and when he had touched his daughter's purple lips, felt of her pallid forehead, laid her crushed arm across the sodden, grewsome robe, as one in a trance he went straight to Minar, the stone-cutter.

His departure seemed to break the lock of the stupor that held them all for at that instant Selma's scream of anguish rang out. Then the terrible silence was broken by a chorus of sounds still more awful and Jezrah, as if beset by demons, rushed through the

house—out into the streets and on to the gloomy tower at the west gate which he called home.

Meanwhile the servants in charge of the spy, unable to endure the suspense of not seeing the cause of the heart-rending cries, dragged their prisoner with them into the audience room. The whole household lay moaning with their faces to the floor while Manasseh, blinded by her grief, strove to wash the face of her foster-child and to cut away the fast-stiffening shreds of her garments. The Assyrian, blinking in the brightly-lighted room raised his head from the rack to which he had been strapped and studied the aspect of the wounded woman, unrebuked and unnoticed.

He marked the brilliant purple lips and the exceeding pallor of the ring around her mouth. He was a little skilled in the remedies for sickness. He had seen the priests of a certain sect in his own country, after hacking themselves with knives in their religious frenzies until they fell bleeding and apparently dead, revived by a simple process and simpler medicine. He had especially noted the hands of these comatose priests and their eyelids. He squirmed to get a better view of Delilah and though a foot kicked him back into his place again, he had seen with much satisfaction that which caused him to plan for his liberty.

At that instant Abdul opened the door leading to the outer row of rooms and stood aghast on the threshold. Manasseh ceased her duties, breaking into weeping afresh and the restrained sobbing every-

where grew into shrieks and screams again. No one could tell the story straight. But Delilah and the carcass in the basket spoke for themselves as soon as Abdul's reeling senses settled.

Where was Jezrah? No one knew. Mesech they told him had gone to the stone-cutters. Stunned as he was, Abdul resented the hysterical servants, the pile of butchered flesh and the sickening smell of blood-stained garments. He drove them all away and ordered Delilah to be taken to the upper chamber. As he passed the Assyrian, the captive caught his mantle in his teeth and as Abdul would have struck himself free—somehow, the bound man's glance and the expression of his face arrested the envoy's attention.

"I swear to thee she is not dead," the spy whispered hoarsely. Abdul signed the men who were about to drag the Assyrian away by a long twisted thong, to leave them and he bent over the man. "She is not dead," the spy again asserted. "She merely sleepeth. But as surely as she sleepeth, she dieth if thou avail thyself not of my healing!"

Abdul spurned him with his heel.

"Save thine own carrion flesh from destruction, if thou canst restore life. The maiden is dead," Abdul ground his teeth, "and thou, being part and parcel of the cause, shalt surely share the penalty." He raised yet again a short whip to strike the man who had power to stay his hand and command attention.

“Charge me a thousand deaths if I do not indeed restore the maid. Blow thy hottest fire and pour molten metal down my gullet if I speak with a lying tongue. Leave but my arms free—guard me with a hundred drawn swords—but do my bidding and ere sunrise she shall be restored to thee!”

At that instant Delilah was borne past Abdul on an improvised stretcher of garden poles and from under the linen cloth that covered her, one, fair, unhurt hand hung appealingly and the line of her brow, nose and chin was marked on the sheet. He knew how fair and sweet she was: any chance, however foolish in its seeming was worth taking—yes, even at my price so Abdul looked up with decision in every line of his countenance.

At one door stood slaves with ewers of water, rolls of sheep’s wool, sand and reed brooms to cleanse the audience-room. At the other were the servants waiting to take the Assyrian to those who should guard him to the tribute train. Abdul signed these latter to stand in watch over the spy and went quickly to the guard-room. Outside, Omar tended the camel and a driver stood listening to the account of the servants who wept as they talked, forgetting what they had told and repeating the story again, adding what horrible embellishments their imaginations could devise. But it all ended as it had begun—in the lament that their mistress was dead—dead—and that Minar was carving the sepulchre! Omar had long wearied

of the variations of the tale but the camel-driver listened with shuddering fascination and would gladly have heard it again but Abdul had come out to them and the servants scattered. He assured himself that Samson still lay unconscious, securely bound. He spoke with Omar privately and in a moment the two men and the camel with its unconscious burden, cleverly hidden from view under an improvised awning, swung off at a good pace toward the west gate.

Abdul went back to the empty guard-room and sought to collect his wits. The Assyrian's suggestion of hope had quickly made itself felt in him and he was reckoning on the success of the plan. He was willing to take the risk of treachery on the part of the spy: willing to pay the utmost price in Gaza for what he was about to do—for the retention of the Assyrian to meet his own purpose—but how to lessen the chance of the miscarriage of the great end to be obtained!

First, he was glad that Samson was disposed of. When Jezrah had so unexpectedly dropped the Jew, wounded and unconscious among them, the camel that Abdul meant to mount presently to join the tribute train was even then at the guard-room door. In a moment, Samson's head was bound and he was being tied to the beast. "Better keep free of prying Jews," Abdul said in accounting to Mesech for the unseemly haste.

From that time on Omar had charge of the priest

of Israel and there was no need to caution Omar twice! Then, without entering the guard-room again or seeing any member of Mesech's family whereby he might have learned of the tragedy, Abdul had gone straightway to the khan where he bespoke another camel, counting on starting immediately with the spy, overtaking Omar and reaching the tribute train before nightfall.

But now all was changed and of the men of Sorek only Samson would sleep that night in the desert. A moment of wonder as to how long Samson would lie unconscious—and of curiosity as to how badly he might have been wounded seized the envoy but dismissing all minor considerations for the immediate concern of saving Delilah, he sat with furrowed brow and tightly interlocked fingers, his inventive mind concentrating itself upon how he should deal with the Assyrian.

When he went back to the audience room it was flooded with water and invaded by bare-footed servants; but just at the edge of the court lay the spy and the two men stood stoutly on guard. From above, there came the sound of a few persons moving about, hushed voices and smothered sobs and Abdul knew that Manasseh and Selma purified and robed their mistress for burial. Abdul looked at the prisoner and so convincing was the aspect of mourning in this house, so repulsive was this man at his feet that it seemed that the dignity and reverence due the dead

woman above demanded he should only flog the tempter and send him off across the desert. But the appeal of the one chance was too strong to be resisted and he turned to the servants who had the spy in charge.

"Guard him well," he ordered sternly of the man he knew best, his eyes on the object of his commands, "take him into the gaol, feed him—bathe him—disguise him by decent clothing and when thou hast done these things bring him to me by the secret passage into the upper chamber."

* * * * *

When the slaves had dried the last drop of water on the floor of the audience room they put the divan in order and lighted the brazier on which incense was sprinkled lavishly. The smoke curled about the apartment and became a part of the shadows; for the evening was coming on and just as the sun sank, Jezrah carefully washed and tended—restless—unable to content himself anywhere, wandered in.

CHAPTER III

So carefully trained had been certain hired servants in the house of Mesech that though not a single word of caution had been spoken by Abdul, no one except those immediately concerned with the experiment of the restoration knew that the prison cage was empty or that an attempt at resuscitation was being made.

Scarcely an hour sufficed to fit the Assyrian to appear before Abdul and another short hour served to prepare the medicine and the instruments the man required. So, just at nightfall, while Jezrah, wild-eyed, possessed by the waking madness watched below, Abdul and the Assyrian took their places on either side of the lifeless woman.

The Gazan carried a long sword under his cloak. The Assyrian held in his lap, on a tray a polished stiletto, a goose quill, a roll of fine linen, a shallow dish of colorless fluid, a handful of finely ground salt and beside him on a brazier, water bubbled in a vessel. To Ahab, who guarded the door at the left, and to Abdul these instruments and preparations smacked of magic. To them Delilah was dead: this man was an agent only to invoke superhuman help and they watched him with awe even though they

were ready to use their swords at the slightest sign of treachery and behind the curtains in the balcony stood a row of most faithful servants with cudgels, utterly ignorant of whom they were guarding but ready to act at a signal.

The sudden darkness fell about them. Then the room was made a glare of light by Ahab who had prepared a pile of resin torches against the trial of the long night and they settled themselves to keep vigil again, while outside, dogs howled and nightingales sang as they never sang before. No other sound from any quarter came into the upper chamber. All through the house, exhausted by the broken rest of the night before and the terrible experience of the day, every one slept—save Jezrah and the men told off to watch; and every where was darkness except in this place where to see plainly meant life or death.

At times the Assyrian, rousing himself from his watching of the woman before him looked about uneasily, made as if to rise and at such times Abdul grasped the sword under his cloak and Ahab moved a step toward him but the Assyrian had no thought of flight. He suspected what effective means had been taken to prevent his breaking away and so not Abdul with his surcharged heart watched more eagerly for a shadow of change in that quiet, white face than did this captive whose question of life was vested in the vitality of the human mechanism before him.

A bell tolled and Ahab counted the mid-watch of the night. Then, suddenly the Assyrian arose and though the sweat of a great excitement glistened on his temples, his hands were steady and he held his face close to Delilah's while the quill fell into the boiling water beside him. Then the stiletto held for an instant in the scalding fluid brought up the quill and though Abdul shuddered he had to watch the hot, sharp steel pierce Delilah's pallid flesh and when this had been withdrawn the quill was pushed into the wound. Drop by drop the fluid in the dish trickled through the horny tube and when it had all disappeared the Assyrian bent again to his watching.

Abdul saw no change in the death-mask but the Assyrian hung over her with hurried breathing and his hand that held the head of her couch showed white and flat at the finger-tips, so tense was his unconscious grasp.

Minute by minute the slow time dragged and the night, mysterious and pregnant of unborn destinies, seemed interminable. Meat and drink had been placed in plenty about the room for the watchers but it lay untouched; by the Assyrian, because he had fed and forgotten food; by Abdul and Ahab who were faint and weak, because their bodies, obedient to do the bidding of the powerful wills that had driven them to this point of endurance, sickened in impotence at the suggestion of taste.

At times the thought of Gaza would flash over Abdul, but to-night Sorek was the capital city of his world and Syria the insignificant province. The court and its honors, he at last acknowledged meant little to him if this white clay, over which they kept vigil became woman again and smiled on him. Her quiet hand, lay near his own but he did not touch it—he had never touched so much as her veil but—perhaps some day she would lay it warm and pulsing on his. Her hair, now dry and springy again, covered the end of the couch where he sat, and trailed to the floor in silky abundance—but he forebore his touch. Best wait; some day she would unbind it for him! Samson in Gaza was not formidable. How easy for this picturesque, philosophic priest to interest a foolish, starved child with only the clumsy provincial, hot-headed little Captain for diversion!

How beautiful she was even in this form of death! Her black, soft lashes curled up from her cheek: he could almost fancy he saw a gleam from beneath them. How he would make those blue eyes darken and dance with happiness! Her lips—"Ah!" he gasped, noting the Assyrian at the same instant. Delilah's lips were no longer purple!

In a flash it seemed to Abdul that an hundred hands shot out from the man opposite him, to do exact bidding. He pressed a handkerchief with pungent balsam to her lips; he forced a thick colorless drop between her teeth; he pulled and stretched and kneaded

her as if she were a mass of dough and anon, breathed his breath into her. Twice he stopped and Abdul, sick with suspense and fear questioned him but no reply came. Then the man, dragging her to the floor, standing astride her body bent to his work with new vigor and added resource. Abdul deserted his post, unable to look longer on the labored manipulation, and since all sense of proportion in time had been destroyed for him he did not know how long he had stood with his face hidden in his mantle, when a hoarse cry escaped the breathless Assyrian.

Abdul hurried to Delilah, looked—and the first arrow of dawn, driving through the eastern window lighted up her face where her quivering nostrils attested that death had been robbed by life. Again the Assyrian forced apart the white teeth and poured something between and in a moment her lips relaxed and a faint, tremulous, long-drawn sigh escaped. Then, when the man had skillfully bound the crushed arm he drew Abdul's cloak from his shoulder and wrapped it around Delilah. Meanwhile the envoy had not moved since that first effort to look upon her living. He was stunned by the great relief and was fighting a strange, almost overpowering desire to sleep. But for a while must the outraged body bend to an imperious will and when the Assyrian was wholly finished of his mission, Abdul signaled Ahab and the two men stepped from behind the curtain.

“Art thou not grateful!” snapped the Assyrian now

wholly a spy again, with a meaning gesture toward Delilah whose breath was coming regularly.

Abdul drew from his finger a ring set with costly gems.

"This is thine," he said to the Assyrian. "Thou goest not to Gaza—but, for the present, thou lodgest in my house," and when the spy had submitted to irons on his ankles and wrists, they led him away.

Manasseh, even though disciplined by long suffering and varied experience, could hardly be made to understand that she must tend the living and not mourn for the dead and so Ahab had actually carried Delilah into her own apartment and opening the latticed windows, let in the rose-gold of the morning sunshine upon them, before the old nurse could comprehend what was told her. But when at last understanding came and Selma's hysterical rejoicing had been quieted, Abdul saw that no relapse would come to the invalid for lack of wise tendance at Manasseh's hands.

With a lover's eyes Abdul noted the woman's appointments of the room within which he stood. She had not been there for many long hours but a pair of tiny, loosened sandals lay near a cushion and a suggestion of sweet perfume hovered around him. Finally he saw that Manasseh awaited his departure in courteous patience and he dragged his benumbed limbs through the halls and down the steps.

Mesech, he had been told, had come in at nightfall and still lay as one dead in the audience room and

so it was to that place that Abdul must go before he should take to his bed—and now that Delilah was saved, nothing seemed to matter but that he should sleep. He had expected to find Mesech only, but as he stepped within the door, a sight of Jezrah, seated in the audience chair with staring, bloodshot eyes, confronted him.

He was not dead—do men sleep thus? Abdul questioned of himself but though there was no other motion made he saw the Captain's lips move.

"What dost thou say, Jezrah?" he questioned.

"Where goest thou?" came the hoarse answer from dry lips.

"To my bed—I would sleep for eternity!" Abdul raised his heavy arms and yawned.

"Sleep!" groaned Jezrah, whose eyelids had not yet moved—"sleep—yea—but who may sleep when she be dead—for eternity!"

Then in Abdul's torpid brain there flashed the knowledge of what he had before him. He crossed the room quickly and mounted the steps to where the half-crazed man sat. "Feel my hands," he said commandingly, "they are cool. Thine are hot with fever! See my lips—they are wet though I have felt no water on them for a day—and yet, Jezrah" he shook the man slightly, "have I this night seen that which would burn my hand and sear my lips did I prove myself no more a man than thou appearest to be."

"What hast thou seen?" Jezrah questioned, won for

a time from his madness by Abdul's assumed ferocity.

"I have seen a miracle worked!"

"A miracle!"

"I have seen that which was dead brought to life again. I have seen stiffened nostrils quiver with breath—I have seen pallid flesh grow red again!"

"What dost thou say, Abdul? What dost thou mean!" Jezrah gasped while his eyelids released from their long palsy, dropped like weights over his eyes.

Abdul increased the pressure on his arm.

"What thy foolish ears will scarce bear the hearing—that our Delilah is not dead but liveth!"

"Our Delilah!" breathed Jezrah, and before Abdul could catch him he had plunged from his chair and falling from step to step lay quiet on the marble pavement below. Abdul bent over him in alarm but discovering that nature had at last only asserted her rights and that he was asleep, muttered with a certain stress of his old cynicism, as he went on his way:

"To this end did Jezrah cheat his youth!"

CHAPTER IV

Selma sat gazing, afar off toward the north, her hands clasped around her drawn-up legs; her cheek laid on her knees. On her small fingers sparkled many jeweled circlets beside the marriage-ring and her short, plaited, matron's veil was held in place by a shining head-band—all gifts of Delilah, who sat now watching the girl's vacant, hungry gaze with a growing tenderness.

Delilah almost longed again for the keen anguish of those hours when she too looked to the horizon—but to the western, not the northern—for the coming of her lord. Truly, were those agonizing days of suspense and doubt well redeemed by the sublime flashes of assurance that Samson yet lived and would come to her again. Her heart slowed its beating now, when she remembered the day she had required of her father account of Samson and how she had forced from him, bit by bit, the whole of the cruel tale; how Jezrah had undertaken to dispute Samson's right to go to her on the house-top that morning and how her lord had maimed the Captain; how later, Samson was taken wounded not sorely, but to unconsciousness and then—oh, how could she hear it and live!—how he had died of a fever in the desert!

No corpse, she knew, passed a city gate from without and so somewhere in the yellow sand in the west his strong, young body lay.

If only again she might delude herself even for a moment that he yet lived; if only she could look as Selma was looking toward the horizon! If only she might lay her hands on his hair once more, even in death!

Never once did any share of hers, in the responsibility that at her call he had turned back, occur to her; and on the other hand she felt no particular bitterness toward her father or even toward Jezrah. A great, overwhelming feeling of the inevitability of it all—of her love and her bereavement—had come incidentally with the knowledge of her loss and it brought a certain phase of reconciliation with a sorrow otherwise unbearable.

Never once did she consider the stretch of long, empty years that might lie before her, so unconsciously but surely did she count on her life's feeding her imprisoned passion and being consumed by it. But just to see him once more! There was a peculiarity of his gait that made his step different from any one's in the world—if only she might hear his foot-fall on the stair! One thing remained—and oh, how she blessed the chance thought! On his forehead, in spite of the discouragement of his persistent attempt to make it lie straight, Samson's hair wound into a soft, shining circle and, when he had bidden her rise from

the altar where Jahveh's blessing had descended, (it seemed to her in visible form) upon them, she had taken the sacred shears that lay thereon and cut the circle of his hair for a living marriage-ring and he had put it on her finger.

This lay now against her heart and she need close her eyes only, to feel the pressure of his strong arms, the warmth of his lips and the fulness—even the perfection of being that his presence invariably wrought in her. Dead? Dead of fever in the desert? Never—never—never, while her own heart beat! Her breath coming hurriedly, her head erect and her shining eyes aroused Selma from her dream. She crept over to Delilah, timidly laying her hand in her lap.

The sun's gleams caught the cut stones making a nest of fire and Delilah remembered her mother's ring. Again and again had she puzzled over it, trying to remember if she had given it to Samson in that last, ecstatic moment or if it had fallen away to be cast out with rubbish—cruel, shameful waste! And then—but with the supremest effort of her will, she forced from her the temptation to hope. What had appeared so real when he and all the promise of her life stood before her that last morning, seemed now a prohibited, impossible thing. To hope, to believe and then to be denied—no—that she could not endure! Her hand sought Selma's to banish the thought and the little woman opened her eyes.

"To-day, they cross the river," she said and her brown eyes filled with tears.

Delilah took the child-like, bejeweled fingers in her strong right hand where neither ring, nor happily scar showed. The left arm although draped so cunningly as not to excite suspicion of deformity or impotence, was scarred and grooved from elbow to shoulder and though the hand and forearm matched its mate in color and form, the whole member lay lifeless at her side. In no other way did she carry mark of Namur's attack. Indeed, in face and figure, she had even grown to a new and more luxuriant beauty. The red line of her mouth was steadier and brighter and the faint rose of her cheeks glowed to crimson in the sun's warmth. Over and above the grief of her irreparable loss, she had enough of life in her to feel the anxiety of the little soul that lay at her feet.

"Beyond the river is the lesser danger, my Selma," she answered comfortingly. "There they possess themselves of earthen walls and the huts of stone that the Assyrian buildd in his first triumph!"

"But he goeth farther from me—even across the great river!" Selma objected, but Delilah met her with a wholesome, honest smile.

"Nay!" What great breadth hath Assyrian rivers! Mere brooks, tiny runlets are granted to the meagre, starved, north country! And hast forgotten, Selma? The land whereon thy Ahab sleeps tonight is Sorek's, when first our soldiers set one foot upon it! Wilt not

rejoice in Ahab's bravery? Thou shalt have a famous warrior for thy husband! Thou shalt bear sons to a noble captain!"

But, Selma, whose head had raised and whose face had brightened as a wilted flower revives, under the grace of Delilah's initial comfort, shrank from welcoming the last consideration. She shook her head, slowly.

"I would choose to dwell forever only with Ahab. I want no sons." She spoke firmly but a little sadly.

"Dost love thy lord?" demanded Delilah, sternly.

"Aye, truly."

"But not wholly, Selma: not deeply—not as" here Delilah stopped, but seeing Selma about to defend herself broke out in a torrent of rebuking question, though her clear eyes glowed with a deep, tender radiance. "Dost thou not care to feel that thou, being with child, carriest a part of thy lord about with thee? Dost not crave to feel thine own selfish, bodily parts give way for the child that part is thine and part is thy lord's?"

Selma looked at her with unmoved countenance and Delilah, her breath coming fast and heavy, broke out again. "Dost thou not long to hold in thine arms—to feed at thy breast a likeness of him who is greatest among men? And he, being great and good, worthier than all—dost feel no need to people the earth with his sons who shall be like him?"

Wholly unmoved, Selma again shook her head. "I need only that Ahab should come from the war!"

Selma sobbed drearily but Delilah could not forbear another argument. "If thou hadst a son who bore his father's look, his voice, his habit—then couldst thou say, when Ahab leadeth the soldiers: 'So is my lord yet with me!' Thus couldst thou cheat thy loneliness—thus couldst thou elude sorrow!"

Selma, robbed in her birth-right felt no answering pang and Delilah half-unmindful only of what forbidden privilege she had given herself in this admonition, pressed the bronze curl closer to her heart and gave herself over once again to the illusion of Samson's presence.

The new moon had come since he had left her, waned—gone, and now another silver sickle was obscured by the brilliant sunset. Sorek snatched from its despondency, by a sudden turn in the tide of war, not only expected to hold its own against the Assyrian, but had hopes of annexing certain strips of pasture-land beyond the river.

The Hebrews fluttered about in noisy distraction for a few days after the strange chance that had deprived them at the same time, both of Samson and the two old servitors. But when they had ordained another judge, and carefully selected neophytes stepped into the vacant places, the ripples on the pool of Israel's existence ceased.

Mesech, recovered from the double shock of Delilah's accident and her restoration found himself to his amazement, practically free from worries; his finan-

cial embarrassment relieved and his armies meeting with unbroken success on the border. His periodical fever of ambition and Samson's disappearance had, for the time broken all connection of sympathy between himself and the Jews and though he had had two reports of Samson's condition since his incarceration at Gaza, Mesech had thought it best to give to Delilah and his household, word of the priest's death.

Without any help on the part of Mesech, the news had spread rapidly through the town and Abdul alone knew that this was not true and that Mesech hoped day by day for word from Gaza, to the effect that Samson had found means to put an end to his unhappy existence. But week after week passed and Mesech's lie was not justified.

So, the household over which Manasseh presided recovered its wonted tone in superficial aspects. The house-top lay as peacefully as of yore in the sunset; Delilah and Selma looked out over the white-and-green town as they were wont to do and all things seemed almost as they had been a year ago—but not quite. A certain soberness, a complete lack of any form of decoy characterized this woman's place on this day. Wine, sweetened bread, and fruit waited for a chance guest as of old, but there were no flowered, bespangled veils to be caught up at emergency—no musical instruments.

Love was veiled by knowledge forevermore for these women; and music need not arouse passion; it

could only awaken pain. Selma's jewels sparkled like flames in the afternoon's sunshine and Delilah's robe was of the richest, costliest silk, but these trappings were donned from an inner necessity of beauty. There was no underlying, half-acknowledged intent to fasten wandering glances.

As a splendid pear tree, stripped by a timely wind of its useless petals, stands in the sunshine, unconscious of its fruit; calmed, yet thrilled with an inexplicable joy as the increased sap goes rushing to its hundred offspring, so Delilah stood—marveling at her well-being, quivering with an unnamed hope, yet longing with all the strength of her fervid soul for the one who was dead—who lay dead of fever in the desert.

Thus the two women sat until the sky darkened and the pale new moon shone above them. Presently Manasseh came and stood behind Delilah's chair.

"Is it thou, good mother?" Delilah asked not opening her eyes that the tears and the sun's level rays had blinded.

For answer Manasseh patted the smooth, warm cheek of her mistress and presently bent over her.

"It groweth late; a heavy dew is falling and," she peered over Delilah's knee, "Selma lieth asleep."

"Just so long, she forgetteth Ahab's absence and the dangers of this war-time," Delilah answered.

"Let her sleep."

"But—but," Manasseh stopped embarrassed, then

hurried on, "below there waiteth—Jezrah—come from the border. He hath news for Selma and prayeth a word with thee."

Manasseh still stood behind her mistress, forbearing to look at her face, and Delilah, although she had no room in her heart for hatred of Jezrah could not bring herself without some preparation to look with composure on this man or even to hear his voice.

"I pray thee, Manasseh, make good excuse to my father and to Jezrah. I cannot speak with him this day. To-morrow—perhaps or another time—but not—to-night!" Her voice broke and she controlled herself with difficulty. She bent over Selma but straightened up again ere she had touched her, looking sharply at Manasseh.

"There are still no ill-tidings?" And when the nurse had given assurance, she shook the sleeping woman gently.

"Wake thee, Selma! Put off thy slumber quickly! Jezrah hath come from the wars and bringeth good tidings of thy lord!"

CHAPTER V

Jezrah's news had been indeed good tidings. Not on the day of the new moon, but while the nights were yet dark, had the soldiers of Sorek moved across the river and seized the coveted possessions and for Ahab's part in the venture, preferment was to be had at the hands of Mesech. Selma's face was radiant with happiness, as she listened to all this and perhaps Jezrah came as near as he could attain to feeling the joy of another soul.

For himself, chaos was his portion, in which hope, fear and all the torments of an unexpressed love, united in innumerable combinations, interminably. He had gone back to the border, still dazed by the news of Delilah's recovery and it took the long, lonely night-watches to cool the fever in his blood and to force a comprehension of conditions in upon him.

It was then that the lover fully awoke in the man. To possess Delilah—that was the sole end of existence. What mattered good report if it did not magnify him in her eyes? What mattered the boundaries of Sorek to him if they twain were not one?

At times, from out the purple, star-lit night her eyes, her incredulous, changing eyes, and her mocking, red mouth would come to him as if in a vision and he

would roll in agony on his hard bed, cursing the ties that bound him to her. Then, on the morrow, he would dare even more recklessly than was his wont; would expose himself beyond all possible excuse to harm from the stinging poisoned Assyrian arrows and coming back to the camp at nightfall unharmed, intoxicated by the danger and his apparent invulnerability would reason that immunity from hurt proved virtue; that his survival in war meant fitness for love.

Day after day, he did what he had not hitherto dared; accomplished what other men trembled to attempt and finally these slow accretions of confidence resulted in a veneer of vanity that permitted Delilah not only to seem possible to him, but the only just reward of his merit.

So, with a marvelous power of dispatch, fed by his fevered impatience he put things in order on the border to endure his absence and went back to Sorek to claim his soldierly, god-like portion and though the first sign of the house on the terrace with its indefinable air of separation, of inaccessibility, dashed his spirits, he pushed on in his purpose with a stubborn pride.

So genuinely, so fatally was Jezrah in love that his first day in Sorek was spent in the rites of preparation, unconsciously but not the less conscientiously performed. He who had hitherto taken pride in a superman's disregard for unessential details of toilet, now strained the resources of Sorek, during an entire day

to make his body and apparel pleasing in the sight of the woman who was to choose him.

By law of suggestion, a delicate wonderful purple was the color of Sorek. The sky, the greatest thing in Sorek, was purple. The immense distances in prospect on all sides were purple and the long glorious nights—time in Sorek for everything but sleep—were purple. And the mixture of purple and white with its overgauze of silver, in which Jezrah presented himself for Delilah's acceptance was not unfair to what natural attractions he could claim.

Even Selma, wholly prejudiced by the lithe, brown Ahab, found some pleasure in the company of this prosperous, splendid Captain. But the days came and went and Jezrah's patience, even under the sustaining grace of courtship, was taxed to its limit before Delilah could bring herself to consent to receive him and she awoke on the morning, for which she had at last promised an audience, so full of the dream that had possessed her night that she forgot the trial awaiting her.

The casements of light bronze set with squares of polished shell were partly open. The late morning sunshine poured in, making a broad band of golden, dancing motes between her hand and the heaven that showed in a strip of deep, quivering purple through the opening. On her open palm, marked with an intricate network of lines, lay the bronze curl that grew deep, warm gold in the sunlight. Again she mar-

velled that a sense of well-being and the unutterable bliss of memory won over the consciousness of loss.

Her hair entirely hid the scarred, useless arm; even in sleep, she unconsciously covered this thing that might cause herself or others to remember what she wished to forget. As she lay there, one long, graceful arm extended to hold the curl in the sunshine, its branching veins showing in almost startling clearness through the transparent skin, her face flushed with health and recreating sleep, even a greater than Jezrah might have chosen her for his portion.

No memory of the trial awaiting her arose; no vague sense of obligation even, broke in upon her musing as the curl warmed and lightened by the sunshine rose to meet her caressing fingers and when Manasseh came in, she raised happy eyes, though the suddenly closed hand hid instinctively under her hair.

"A bright morning's greeting to thee, my child! Hast slept well?"

"So well, that I must needs share slumber with happy dreams!" Delilah answered, looking away into the strip of sky showing between the casements.

"Then thou wilt quick to thy bath. Selma awaits thee," and Manasseh stood at the bed-side with Delilah's garments held suggestively.

"No haste, good mother. Selma is pleased to wait—and—no task calleth to rising." She sighed. "Lessons are ended for Delilah!"

Then Manasseh, as one who in mercy cuts quickly,

bent over her mistress. "Thou hast forgotten thy word to thy father. Jezrah awaiteth thee."

The steady current of Delilah's blood was too deep and purposeful now to quiver and stop as of yore, so no shadow of paling came into the fair, flushed face as it turned to the window, but Manasseh must bear the reproach of the suddenly saddening eyes.

"Ah—h!" she sighed. "Why doth Jezrah plague me!"

"Thou canst not find it in thy heart to love him?" Manasseh asked cautiously, after a moment's hesitancy.

"Love him!" came the response in a low, horror-struck voice. "Love Jezrah, Manasseh? Is thy foster-child so wholly strange to thee?"

A flash of communication passed between the two women and Manasseh convinced at last of the thing she both hoped and feared, quickly evaded what else Delilah might have said in a panic fear of useless explanation.

"Then," she said as she lifted Delilah from her couch, "mayest thou quickly end this plague of Jezrah." Delilah moved obediently under her hands. "Selma hath taken thy green-bordered robe and thy sandals of silver," Manasseh added, as she wound the girl's hair in her veil.

The splendor of Jezrah's plumage was not lost on Delilah as Manasseh led her into the upper chamber

where he sat. She saw in her quick survey how carefully he was shaven and noticed the unusual attention he had given to his ungloved hands. The effect was everything but gained, however and as an understanding of the purpose of all this grooming came over her, she had to force herself not to rush away from him: had to school herself into composure of mien and harder than all, had to stifle the feeling of resentment rising in her heart

For the honor of her dead lord, she had bound herself to be just to all men and especially to this man at whose hands she thought she had suffered most directly.

It might be, she told herself, that her destiny stood in the path of his pursuit of duty and dare she shame her gracious lord by a petty hatred! Ah, the sweetness of his smile—the mercy in his heart! She too, must be gracious and merciful! So, crushing every harder impulse, she held out one cool, white hand to Jezrah and as he knelt to kiss it, she said with a manner that was stately although she intended only, graciousness:

“Thou art welcome, Jezrah.”

He dropped back on his heels in wonder at her increased beauty. The simple robe with its border of rich green showed the heightened color and the increased proportions of her body to advantage. Utterly unconscious of what he was feeling, unconcerned with what he might be thinking, she sat there

striving to be just to him, to maintain her serenity, while he knelt watching her. Finally, with the air of one who dares, even if he die, he arose and stood before her.

"Hast naught save welcome for Jezrah?" he questioned, looking at her with honest inquiry in his pale blue eyes.

"Welcome is much from her who requireth nothing of any man," she answered in an attempt to spare him his useless questions.

"But thou canst give," he returned, ignoring the warning. "Delilah requireth nothing of any man—but Delilah can give!"

"What can Delilah give!" The passion of her sorrow lent pathos to her voice. "Ah, Jezrah, take this word without question. Delilah hath nothing—nothing to give!"

But to his mistaken senses, the tremulous tone meant only regret for wasted enthusiasm, a proper, womanly humility. His heart leaped at the supposed advantage.

"There be those who take," he said, rushing on to unwonted fulness of speech, "what seemeth not fit to give and turn it to their own good uses. If thy weak, maiden fancy hath led thee somewhat astray—on thy life, Jezrah forgiveth thee that! Thou canst redeem this error, thy mockery, thy tardiness of love with thy instant devotion, thy kisses——"

The cry that broke from the suffering woman stopped the flow of his words as it froze for the

moment the course of his blood. Delilah arose and in a storm of wordless anger pointed to the curtained arch. Her movement, so swift, so unguarded swept back the drapery of her robe from her shoulder and a portion of the livid, seared, upper arm became exposed. It shocked Jezrah even in the grasp of his angry reaction.

"If thou hast no love," he shouted at her, and her raised arm dropped in a quick effort to adjust the displaced mantle on the other shoulder, "yet shalt thou pay with an honest gratitude. Thou hast come unscathed from thy grievous fault with but the flaw of a pitted arm, yet, where hadst now thy precious body, thy hair, thine eyes, thy little silver-shod feet have been, had not Jezrah risked his arms—nay, exposed to death his very life for thy saving? For the arm I might not redeem, thou shalt keep thy love—but for thy body I snatched from the jaws of the preying beast, I claim thy gratitude!"

She dropped into her chair again and her hands lay before her. Her quivering nostrils and her quickly rising and falling bosom only, attested her suffering.

"If thou questioned thine advantage in saving a swooning woman from the grasp of an instinct-bound beast, better hadst thou left hair, eyes, feet—everything to Namur, for thou needs must save with them that which makes them of no account to thee. Only for that which thou hadst not meant to save, am I grateful to thee!"

"What is this thing for which thou art beholden to me—that I did save without my purpose?" he asked mockingly.

"I know not what I may call it," she mused. "The words men use are weak vessels to hold the bursting wine of my thought. What I called it once I may not call it now, so great hath grown the content." She smiled on Jezrah, in momentary forgetfulness of his hateful suit and again his foolish hope arose.

He dropped on his knees before her, seizing the helpless hand that lay on her knee. She looked at him with startled eyes and his courage rose once more to the point of speech when he pressed her cold fingers and they were not withdrawn.

"I have given thee the line," he hurried on in a strangely eloquent voice, "and thou hast played with my purpose as a flashing fish in the troubled Assyrian waters. Thou didst dive into deep pools, dart into rocky shallows, but—tired, at last thou shalt rest in the net under my hand. Jezrah hath not wasted passion in petty loves: no woman of Sorek hath felt of his tenderness! Jezrah hath kept himself for Delilah! How else should he turn without rebuke, the fortune of Sorek to his own desire? How else should the gods prove him aright by prospering him in all his ways! Thou shalt go to Gaza: thou shalt sit beside queens—nay," his flashing teeth were close to her face but she could not move, "thou shalt be queen thyself, if thou but yield thy will to Jezrah!"

No hasty movement, no rush of anger divided her being at this moment of his conclusion. When Jezrah caught in his hot, moist hands her helpless fingers, it did not occur to Delilah that the sound hand lying in her lap could pull them away from contamination. Her whole power of feeling and willing was vested in the outrage of that helpless hand, though there was no outward sign of this inward recoil. He was soiling her redeemed body with his fumbling, spasmodic caress! He was crushing between his sacrilegious fingers the hand whose vitality had gone out with another priceless life! It was direst desecration and she was—no, not helpless! She must not be helpless when that which her lord had blessed lay in danger! She hardly heard the torrent of words, half pleading, half threat that poured out upon her, so strongly did she will to draw that hand from his grasp.

When he had ceased talking, he crushed it between his own again and a hot prickly sensation went from her finger-tips to her shoulder. His hand seemed like burning fire as he drew the helpless member close to him, pressing it against his beating heart. Shame! that it should feel the quick, hard throbs of his furious blood! But her whole body seemed useless, every hope of an end of this sacrilege lay in that one dead arm.

He laid her fingers on his lips, not in respectful salute as had been in his greeting, but with burning, crushing kisses and the stinging pressure ran in

excruciating tortures from finger-tip to shoulder again. Once she nearly cried out but her effort at willing had concentrated every tittle of her power. Jezrah reached for the other hand, allowing the helpless one to drop to his neck. Falling just within his tunic, it struck on the hard muscles of his throat. Thereupon, with a shriek born not only of the agony of contact, but in a monstrous effort of will, Delilah snatched both her hands from him with a force that flattened her breasts in the impact on her bosom.

"Go!" she panted. "Dost not see that there is in me neither love for thee, nor gratitude nor anything but a loathing, strong enough to infuse life into dead members at thy touch? For the love I bear Samson—dead in the desert—I strove to be just to thee, to endure thy presence, to speak thee fair! But knowledge born of that love hath freed me from the debt even of courtesy. I send thee now from my presence and never while Delilah liveth, will she set eyes upon thee again. Just as thou hast made an intolerable disgust grow out of my kindness for thee; so if thou but mar my vision with sight of thee again, shall thy death spring for thee from this hand that fear of thee hath made to live."

"Manasseh!" and she turned to the woman who shivered in terror at the miracle and whom they both up to this time had forgotten. "Give passage to Jezrah."

She pointed to the curtained arch with her left arm and hand.

At noon the elaborate purifying that she had demanded in her girlhood after she had undergone fancied contamination, had been put through and Manasseh was chafing the reviving arm, whose constant prickling had given Delilah no rest. After a while she seemed to sleep and the nurse bent over to see if repose had really come to her. With a sigh of relief, she noted the lax eyelids and the deep, regular breathing and was about to drop back to her unwearied task of stroking the stinging arm again, when a faint stain on the white bosom of Delilah's tunic caught her eye. She looked closely and discovered a similar spot on the linen over the other breast. Unconvinced, she went to the casement and let the full mid-day sunshine flood over the woman who moved in her sleep but did not waken. Again Manasseh bent over her and the eyes though old and failing were not deceived.

CHAPTER VI

The confidence Manasseh had hitherto shrunk from sharing as the cause and infliction of a useless pain, she now with great tact and tenderness elicited, and her efforts were met with no unwilling response. In the long hours of exercising and easing the reviving arm, bit by bit the story came out, beginning with the impulsive flight to the temple of Jahveh and the long wait beside the altar, to Samson's taking her back to her chamber door.

Manasseh questioned her closely and sternly as to the marriage ceremony which they had celebrated in the temple, alone. She did not hesitate to probe to the tenderest part; not so much for the honor of the child that was to come as to insure her right to reverence her priest who had gone; and in all ways was she satisfied. He had died as strong men of her people had died before, by a chance fate and the petty machinations of their racial enemies.

But he was still enshrined in her heart as a worthy servant of Jahveh: as honest to the woman he loved as he had been true to himself.

She went at her first privilege to the book-room of the temple and, filed away at the end of many such entries on a long scroll, where any man might read

but where as yet no one had cared to look, was the record of the marriage, in due form, with no proper seal or security omitted.

Manasseh's falling tears blotted the page from sight when she placed the precious document in a more secure recess, and as she passed out, she did not omit cautioning the young servitor in her sonorous, beautiful Hebrew, as to the care of this particular vault.

From that time on, a certain sympathy she had always withheld from her foster-child in obedience to the unwritten law that Israel should trust no pagan, was given lavishly and Delilah could have spoken with Manasseh as freely as she communed with her own soul. She received with a feeling of awe, tempered by a deep humility, the assurance of motherhood from Manasseh and though, after her last shred of unbelief was torn away they did not speak of it again for a long time, neither she nor Manasseh could forget the wonder of it for a moment.

Delilah lay for days on the house-top alone, welcoming the freedom from intrusion without knowing that Manasseh stood on guard below. She looked constantly toward the west, telling herself again and again that she should once more bless Samson's sunny brown head, look into deep, honest eyes again, eyes like his—eyes that would be his and—she thrilled at the thought—hear again that quick, firm step on the stair!

She slowly lifted her hand that was growing strong

with the double force of her vitality. How glad was she to have two arms! How could she lift—how could she hold a child with only one arm! She would always bind the upper part with soft silken bands; there should be no chance for an accident that would startle this new Samson with the sight of anything unnatural in her. Then at times, oftenest at dusk, when Manasseh would come to lead her back to the flower-wreathed, perfumed chamber with its star-like lights, she would cast a longing farewell out to the paling sky and an intolerable anguish would seize her that Samson would never see the boy that was his—that no father's blessing would ever come to the son that was theirs!

And often, as Manasseh in pursuance of a certain purpose, would read to the two young women some tale of ancient Hebrew virtue, Delilah's heart would burn with sorrow that sons and daughters would not be given to her, that never while she was Delilah and Sorek was Sorek would she and her lord take counsel together and train this child as ^{*}was his due. And if at times, when she read or told some powerful story, Manasseh would see that not even youth and hope and the combined resistance of will were keeping pace with the rising tide of grief in the bereaved one, she would send Selma away on some pretext and soothe the sorrow she had purposely invoked, noting with satisfaction that the lesson of Hebrew morals had struck home.

Thus was Delilah trained for the part of being mother to the child of Samson and not even Manasseh knew how passionately she was attracted to the people and the customs and the spirit of Israel.

To Manasseh, her people were pitiable even in the nobility of their racial destiny. Along with their virtues, she felt their petty, moral makeshifts: beneath their dignity, she saw the habit of slaves. Her eyes, sharpened by years and her views, made keen by her prospective of life among Syrian pagans, pierced through the tawdry garb of Jewish pretension down to their beauty-loving, God-fearing hearts and she could despise their practices and their conscious intents while she revered the purity of their transmitted ideal. Now and then a worthy Israelite would arise, but he went down before opposing forces and the greatest of these sacrifices had been Samson.

Thus Manasseh reasoned but Delilah reasoned not at all. To her, Samson was the embodiment of his race and she would have endured a thousand bodily deaths to have been born again into Israel. When her soul was not being wrung with sorrow, the beauty of the ancient writings, be they songs or sermons, satisfied her hungry heart and met the need of her thirsting mind. Whole passages of Hebrew lore stood word for word in her memory and sometimes when even the promise of the child could not lessen the unbearable burden of her great loneliness, or still the cry, that day by day grew more insistent in her heart for

the comfort of Samson's gracious spirit, she would lie with clenched hands and furrowed brow, saying over and over the masterful passages, until the intrinsic power of the great thoughts, pounding away at her tortured mind would finally gain admittance and work its miracle of comfort.

Manasseh noticed that always at the turning of the moon, these periods of unusual grief would overtake Delilah; while between such crises, the serenity and happy musings that characterized her long, lonely waiting were almost unbroken.

Selma was gradually initiated into a knowledge of the marriage and of what was to come but since Delilah, whose demands for companionship were satisfied with the understanding with Manasseh, felt no desire to speak of it to her, the younger matron held somewhat aloof and looked with an increased feeling of awe at her mistress, neither whose grief nor whose joy could she understand.

Manasseh left her own apartment and made her bed with Selma in the anteroom but with a tact born of wisdom and pointed by love, she rarely denied Delilah her midnight relief of tears, and went in to her mistress, only when she struggled with a sorrow clearly too great to be endured alone.

When a fuller sense of what a child of Samson's would mean, came to her, Delilah laid the ring of hair away in a secret place, with an instinctive avoidance of idolatry. She knew that when the child should

come that this single, brown curl would be lost among those upon which she would lay it and she must wait.

But one night the terrible impression that Samson wanted her—was calling, possessed her. She stopped her ears with her hands—with her clothing but none the less clearly she heard that same sad, heart-broken cry.

She wondered how far out on the desert he lay. If only she had gone to him at first and snatching her jewel from the red rust about him, had laid him where by eye and hand she might know that he could not call: where by her senses she could be convinced that only this child of theirs was left of the man that was. Why had she not done that! How could she have sat idle on the house-top when he lay alone in the desert! Why had she not gone—why should she not go!

She went to the casement. The old moon had just died but beckoning stars held out countless promises of guidance and faintly from the khan came the tinkle of camel bells. Very quietly and quickly she dressed herself but when she would have passed out between the curtains, Manasseh forbade her.

Once the old woman thought she would be obliged to call help so set of purpose and so incomparably stronger in body was this grief-crazed woman than herself. But finally she lay quiet and Manasseh without a word placed the lock of hair together with the Teraphim that Delilah had taken from Samson, in the sick woman's hands. With a sob, the stubborn resist-

ance gave way and when Delilah lay faint and tractable before her, Manasseh told her she had found the Jewish amulets pressed into the flesh over her heart, when she cut away the blood-soaked garments. And the ring, Delilah flashed back. Where was the ring she should have given her lord?

"What ring dost thou mean, my child?" Manasseh asked as she untied Delilah's sandals and dropped them noiselessly to the floor.

"My mother's ring that lay with the necklace, the head-band and the jewels in the box. Selma said, 'Tis Jewish,' and since my lord had sprung from Israel, and I was made by rite of marriage his true and lawful wife, I answered, 'So will I wear it!' But she withheld me, knowing not what right was mine."

Manasseh had unbound Delilah's hair and the heavy outer garments lay unfastened beneath her, but this the latter did not regard so intent was she on the thought of the ring. Then the nurse, accomplished of her first and lesser purpose, sat upon the bed and took the two hands of her mistress between her own.

"Wouldst thou choose to be of Israel, daughter—not in virtue of thy love, because thy lord is noble, but by necessity of thy blood that should link thee with what is weak and small and pitiable——" but Delilah stopped her.

"There is no weak nor small nor pitiable in Israel! What if they slip about our streets with hanging head and dragging feet! Are they not ashamed of the

base, blind power above them, only? Do they not carry under their scanty hoods and narrow cloaks the brain and the heart of Sorek? What hast thou not told me, Manasseh, of the bondage in Egypt, of the courage, the faith, the hope that bade them break their chain! Who of us should not rather truckle to masters, than to brave the desert, invite destruction—suffer manifold death to follow out a dream? What other people hath a god who is everywhere, knoweth all things? Ah, Manasseh,” and Delilah’s voice, broken by her labored breathing, rose with the music of a passionate prayer, “if only I might have stood, as the women who bore the fathers of Samson stood and felt the touch of those power-infused hands when Moses went to Horeb! Ah, if only Delilah, a mote lost in the great heart of travailing Israel might have followed the smoky cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night!”

The one moment had come, but Manasseh knew not how to tell it. What would this quivering, surcharged creature do if she knew that the great Leader stricken with death, had indeed on the path to his lonely grave laid his hand in blessing and with fervent prophesy on the head of a woman whose blood now spoke within her? But she must be told; perhaps this comfort had been too long withheld and Manasseh went about her business as one for whom choice of ways is past.

“Dost remember—canst tell of what appearance was

this ring thou gavest unto thy lord?" And Delilah upon whose mind every visible line of its marking was indelibly fixed, described it with utmost accuracy.

Manasseh questioned her yet again.

"Dost know what symbol lieth behind the ring and the giving of it?"

Delilah repeated what Selma had told her.

"Selma hath acquainted thee with the ceremony but there is strange, beautiful accounting for the rite. Somewhere in the path of Israel, when she wandered out from Erech, she met with a pure, new people. Half-gods, these, maybe, since neither Israel nor any men live like unto these.

"They slept at sundown, they ate to feed their bodies; they built as birds build with the instinct of protection not pretension. When they mated, no selfish, blind emotion drove them, but the sure knowledge that marriage meant begetting of good children. Hence they loved as they ate, unashamed and justified and when a woman knew that a child was begotten, then with ceremony in the sight of all the people she celebrated in graphic symbol the sacrament of union—she placed a ring upon the finger of the man who by this sign was made her lord in all men's sight. And Israel, quick to learn and quick to love what pleaseth her, tried with erring means to do as these did but," here Manasseh sighed, "of all this there remaineth only striving and a symbol."

"Nay. There remaineth Samson," answered Deli-

lah whose peace of mind had been won at last. She felt her heart leap, because she knew that in spirit and in deed he had attained to the purity of the ancient ideal, but Manasseh was not to be turned from her purpose.

"Thou hast not questioned—hast thou not considered why in thy mother's box of jewels should lie a Jewish ring?"

Delilah looked at her a moment, pondering before she answered.

"This house was built by Israel. Once, they say, the Hebrews possessed jewels of untold wealth and ancient value. Is it not the law that—even sacred, ceremonial rings fall to the victors?" She spoke slowly, unwilling to believe that her mother would have kept a thing which no law of men could have permitted her to possess.

"Before the Jews were bonded, before Israel bowed to masters in Sorek, that ring lay with thy mother's jewels because—I cannot know why my tongue stumbleth in the telling—thy mother was of Israel! There were days in Sorek when for grace and goodness, and all that makes a woman, even noble Syrians like thy father chose the maids of Israel, not despising that there came with them a princely dower. Thou canst not understand, to see an Hebrew woman now with what great reverence and ceremony, Mesech wooed thy mother, nor how the whole town called the marriage good, nor with what great rejoicing thou

wast born. But, after that a sudden madness spread from Gaza and when Israel lay in the dust, bound and spurned except for meanest uses of barter, men forgot thy mother who had died and Mesech denied his daughter knowledge of her blood! This shouldst thou know—thou art of Israel! For years have I tested thy humors, proved thy parts and what base, alien spirit lay within thee was breathed out long ago!”

Manasseh stopped, marveling at the quiet face before her. The dawn was lighting up the double square of the open window and Delilah was gazing out to the violet, morning sky.

“‘A mystery as great as thou confronts me,’” she was saying. “‘What else is from thy mother!’ Ah!” she turned to Manasseh. “He knew—think you not he knew, before he lay dead in the desert that not only a ring of carven gold, but blood and belief and power—fitness to love him, came also from my mother?”

CHAPTER VII

The long, melodious note from Omar's horn died echoless in the desert. The tired drivers stretching their limbs with an accompaniment of lazy groans, slowly arose. Then a heaving, undulating row of camels stumbled to their feet and the noon-day halt was over. Directly behind Omar, whose clothing and face matched his favourite brown beast, came what was to be a moon's wonder in Sorek, even though the simplest of the little vagabonds haunting the bazaar knew that in Gaza, men understood how to bleach camels snow-white

Before sun-down, the journey would be at an end and at this noon halt, Abdul had caused his beast's travel-stained gear to be taken off, his animal to be washed and gorgeous trappings to be put on, instead. Stained leather, pierced and set with glittering nail-heads, was trimmed with fringes and tassels made from loops of twisted, golden thread, alternating with strings of beads cut from the scintillating rock crystal. The shining weapons and the play of the varied color against the camel's white, fleecy sides, made a spectacle that even the callous drivers were impelled to regard. Abdul had clothed himself in keeping with his beast's magnificence and on his knees he bore a

curiously inlaid box of carven cedar. All this was for Delilah and his impatient desire ran ahead of the fleet feet that carried him back to her.

He considered with satisfaction his sojourn in Gaza. How good a guide was love! He had followed its leading and step by step paths were opened, difficulties smoothed out and all things swung into harmony with the tune of his own great purpose.

He smiled in self-congratulation at the wisdom he had shown in enlisting the help of Zorah herself when it became necessary to account for the absence of the Assyrian in Gaza. How the royal courtesan had managed this he did not know but he appreciated none the less the relief that the permission to retain the spy in Sorek for the present had given him; and Zorah had proved her boast that want of desire only to use her power, permitted the younger beauties of the court to hold the ear of its head.

Zorah's robe, he noted, had been cunningly devised to reach up to her chin that the sagging, discolored neck might not show. There were the straight lips still red as of yore, the glorious ruin of her eyes that had burned with love and hate and been drenched with a thousand tears—the white forehead still unlined and above all, displayed with a wanton disregard of custom, was the marvel of her golden hair.

Abdul was glad that he had been generous to her in their past. She had not been able to refuse the boon he craved even though she suspected that a

woman was somewhere in hiding and it was not her custom to lift her hands from a victim until the breath had gone out of him. In truth, Zorah was not to be put aside at will, whatever interpretation Abdul might please himself to put upon her acquiescence. Even though every visible and intentional bond between them be severed by Abdul, even though her heart had been shredded bit by bit to feed her passion for conquest, still must the habit of a life-time persist and she took his expressions of gratitude and his adieux as she wished them and not as they were offered.

But Abdul, feeling now in his maturity the power of a great love, recked not of Zorah. She was past and all was past save Delilah. What might have disturbed his satisfaction had not the exotic confidence inspired by his passion been so great, would have been the memory of the sightless lunatic in the gaol in Gaza. For lunatic Samson truly was when Abdul had gone to him.

He lay bound hand and foot, gnawing his bloodless lips, muttering incoherently, unconscious of everything save the storm in his brain. Looking at the man so mysteriously commanding even in his degeneration, Abdul questioned the guard again and again. He found that the captive Jew was generally docile and though he slept little and neglected both food and drink, performed with an amazing power of dispatch the unusual tasks required of him. But, when the

periodic madness would set upon him, he would lie with covered face moaning and calling and passing through all the stages of an increasing madness, would finally collapse into the state wherein only shallow, irregular breathing attested life.

What the end would be seemed evident and unavoidable and Abdul though he knew not all he saw, felt a regret for the appalling catastrophe before him; experienced a feeling of awe even, in that he had before him the spectacle of a single, struggling soul in the grasp of the world-motives. This Abdul could not wholly forget in the fervor of his love-dream, but if the vision of it haunted him, he argued that Samson was indeed dead: that even Delilah's simple goodness of heart could find nothing love-worthy in that wreck, should life persist in the tortured body.

Abdul reminded himself of the splendid fire of Delilah's enthusiasm when she declared for the priest—was it only seven moons ago? How beautiful and young and even child-like she appeared, he mused, when in her glorious innocence she had wrested by very force of her potentiality the impulses that destiny was holding in abeyance for her—using the words she could so little understand! Often and often Abdul had thought of that night, divided between a jealousy of the priest who had caught her errant, maidenly regard and the congratulation that the luxury of a somewhat maturer passion would be his when he should claim her for his own.

He remembered the day that he was to depart on this same journey to Gaza—how he had cajoled the watchful Manasseh into allowing him to stand by Delilah's side for a moment as she slept in a shaded corner of the house-top. Scarcely had he restrained himself from touching the blue-veined temples, where tiny beads of perspiration showed under the soft, black curls and his eyes feasted on the barely parted red lips and the gleam of her white teeth. How separate she would be at court! How her candid, straight gaze would shame the other women's wandering, affected glances! How honest she would be for him and how surely every man in his heart would desire her! How he would avenge the long record of men, dead and those yet breathing, when Zorah should measure her double years, her failing beauty, her devious ways—yes, even the magic gold on her head to Delilah's youth, her loveliness, her fair-dealing and her blue-black tresses!

He thought of the Assyrian and was glad he had taken the trouble to allow him all the liberty possible with the assurance of his safe-keeping.

Abdul, distrusting the Philistines of his household, had employed two Jews to guard the spy during his absence, thus investing the instinct of fanatic zeal where loyalty to him and love of his gold might not serve.

He could depend on Mesech. Before this journey to Gaza had been undertaken, felicitations had been

exchanged between the two men on the subject of Delilah's espousal and Abdul now rode impatiently, seeing the immediate initiation of his suit at hand.

And so, in dreams that matched the glow of the sunset behind him, he gained the western gate of Sorek, sitting restlessly under the guard's account of Jezrah's incredible victories over the Assyrian: how with a handful of men, he had put thousands to rout, adding to the glory and the dominions of the Philistines. Mesech, it was explained, had himself met the would-be peacemakers half way between Sorek and the disputed grounds and should presently be at home with good tidings.

After many formalities as befits a walled town in war-time the caravan was admitted and with few words and a rich largess to Omar, Abdul left the train, riding with a single servant between rows of admiring townspeople to the house on the terrace.

Mesech, since the memorable night when Manasseh had forced him to listen to an account of Delilah's marriage and what lay in store for her, had avoided contact with his daughter and so she had not been called upon to make the explanation that she was ready to offer when the opportunity should come. Her days were passing peacefully and except for the periods of strange, nervous excitability, happily. Hour by hour Manasseh would sit talking to her of her mother and the golden days of Israel in Sorek. Delilah

found ways to inquire into the parentage of Samson. Through Manasseh, travelers and camel-drivers were questioned for information concerning the Hebrews in Erech and at last Delilah was possessed of the sum of the knowledge concerning Samson in and around her home. Again and again she demanded account of his boyhood, delaying over the merest detail until it seemed that the maternal instinct absorbed all other phases of passion: that even the person of the man she loved became identified with the idea of the child she awaited. She was in this buoyant, exalted state of mind, when word came that Abdul craved her presence. Often had she wondered why he had not come to receive her bounden acknowledgment of gratitude. She felt prompted to repay him with full confidence that he might know what a great thing he had done when he won her from death.

So Manasseh robed her to her liking and she was dressed for this audience as befitted a matron of Israel. Her hair, parted and braided in two, hung behind her ears and over her bosom to her knees. Her mother's head-band held in place a soft, blue veil that hung in deep folds down her back. Draped about an underdress of white linen was a mantle of blue silk, embroidered in volutes of silver thread. The full sleeves hung quite to her finger-tips and when she sat with folded hands, no one might know if she be matron or maid. Thus she awaited Abdul and when

he stood motionless within the door, amazed at her beauty, her eyes gleamed with a rare excitement.

"My heart leapeth to greet thee, Abdul," she said smiling when he crossed to her.

"Thou dost not stint the measure of thy kindness," he murmured, as his cold fingers touched the hand she held out to him.

"How should one forget who it is to whom a life is owed—and yet," she smiled a little sadly, "thou hast been slow to claim my gratitude."

Abdul, paler than was his wont, not knowing what her seriousness meant since it affected him so strangely, strove to fight against the portent of it.

"Had they laid thee in the pierced stone-work of thy tomb," he commenced with forced gayety, "yet, hadst thou won again thy breath without the work of dark Assyrian magic! Thou hadst pushed thy little fingers through the curious carven leaves and had surely called for saving to what chance traveler passed thee by. Thou owest nothing of thy life to Abdul."

"Ah—nay, my friend! What could dark, Assyrian magic count me if thou hadst not known Delilah should not die! Life saved through thee is doubly worth the living! Thou shalt not, with thy strange humility, divide my joy!"

She smiled with such convincing sincerity, that Abdul won from prudent, reasoned courses struck straight to the heart of his one great fear.

Then thou holdest naught of enmity against Abdul

that he did interfere and then suggest extremity when question of—" but the sudden, inexplicable saddening of her eyes would have withheld him had she not interrupted him directly.

"That which his great Jahveh held in store for Samson, was written even from the beginning and not thy extremest interference. Abdul, could turn the scale one hair's weight!"

"Thou art cured of thy childish fancy!" he breathed, drawing near her in sudden relief, but she bent his words to her own meaning.

"Childish fancy! When I first had seen thee, Abdul, was I long since cured of childish fancy. Often as I close mine eyes, I try to think those days are come again—days when a twisted rose-stem, a broken bird-wing were grief for a sun's course! Grief! Think you, Abdul—when a day's end or a moon's length would even restore the loss! . . . Ah, and when I open mine eyes now, that grief I see is that which neither days nor moons nor all life's span be long enough to righten." She clenched her hands together and lowered her voice that threatened to break control. "Childish fancy! Dreams are over, Abdul—life is come upon me!"

Abdul sat with the enforced control of a strong man who distrusts a new emotion. His eyes were fastened on the tensely locked hands before him but he did not touch them and his voice vibrated with a passion that transcended petty, conscious desire.

"Yea—thy past is dead and done with! Life is come upon thee, Delilah. As one stands awed before the treasure that is his: as men lie dumb beneath the image of their gods, so would I kneel suppliant before thee. What shall I offer thee? What shall I say to thee?

"Ah! Thou canst satisfy the need that nigh had burst the bonded courtesy of welcome!"

Her smile swept away every vestige of his reserve and he dropped to his knees before her.

"What have I, who find my boasted worth a paltry nothing—what have I to offer thee, Delilah!" he cried, but the utter abjection of his proud spirit informed her to no extent and she hurried on to her heart's ease.

"Where have they laid my lord?" she cried, struggling to compose her voice. "Stricken of fever on the journey—dead in the desert! that is all they tell me! He lies in the sand, the hard yellow grains on his hands, in his hair! Oh, this is all they grant me! I would know, Abdul—" but his hard grasp caught her interlocked fingers

"Who is thy lord—what dost thou say to me?" he demanded.

"Ah friend—then thou, too, dost not know? Shall I cry it from the house-top that Samson is my lord, him whom they left stricken of a fever—dead in the desert!"

Abdul's eyes lost all familiar look as they stared at her, but she bent nearer to him, unnoticing.

"Thou wilt go with me, Abdul. Together shall we find him and bring him back to Sorek. Then shall he lie in a splendid sepulchre and that all men may know, it shall be written in stone, that Delilah's lord is dead and that Delilah's love is there! Thou wilt do me yet another service, Abdul—thou wilt search with me to find my lord?" she pleaded, but Abdul could not answer. "I may not press thee now for action," she went on gently and more slowly. "This great God, Jahveh, who then did bless our union, hath granted me a child of Samson and when I go out with thee upon the desert, I may not risk the tender, precious life, to find the body of my lord. This Manasseh counseleth and it is well. So must we wait a little."

She looked at him in gentle trust and confidence and his hand loosened from those she had not known he held.

The sun-down bells were ringing through the town, now near, now far from hill-top, grove and pagan temple. The tinkle and drip of the fountain could be heard and evening roses bursting into bloom sent gusts of perfume out upon the air at every shuddering awakening. An automatic sunshade collapsed with a sliding, lazy motion and Delilah yielding to the wave of relaxation, dropped her arms to her side in patient hope of Abdul's answer.

Then, for the first time he noted her comeliness

of motherhood but this was not needed to set the seal upon their new relation.

Word by word after the first shock of surprise, the truth had come upon him and in the wreck of his own hopes by some sudden alchemy Abdul's greater soul was born. He saw in miraculously clarified vision the right of this woman's claim and from out the chaos of his immolated passion, one impulse stood defined—how he might shield, how protect her!

* * * * *

But again and again as they spoke with each other, his mind wandered and a sense of unreality beset him when at last Manasseh came and Delilah left him with a smile of tender gratitude. He sat for a long time, neither thinking nor feeling, devoid of any reason for going, just as he had none for staying.

Outside in the fragrant dusk, his servant dozed and the camel deserted by the sated sight-seers dragged its costly glory in the dust without rebuke.

When he reached his home, Abdul passed as one benumbed through familiar halls to his lonely garden. His dog only, awaited him there, but a carafe of cooled wine had been placed beside the fountain. He poured a brimming cup and raised it to his lips but there was a sudden stir in the branches directly above him and he held the wine a moment untasted. A faint, low sound fell upon his ear—surely a bird's note, yet it seemed as if Delilah spoke to him.

He put the brim of the vessel again to his lips when a flurry of wings, too swift for sight, prevented his drinking and a mysterious bird mocked Delilah's voice. The heat had grown with the darkness and the heavy fumes of the wine seemed to increase the atmosphere's oppressiveness, so, dashing the contents of the cup to the stones at his feet, Abdul dipped the vessel into the fountain and drank of the water.

Then he sat again and tried to realize that hope was dead; that in spite of all contriving, Delilah was denied him. But, somehow he could not think beyond the mere words and finally even bodily sensation began to fail. The dog whined and pushed a cool, caressing nose under his master's hand but there was no response. Gradually Abdul's head sank to his breast and when the first star was mirrored in the quiet pool, he lay on the stones, unconscious beside the drying stain of the wine.

CHAPTER VIII

The feast of Asshur had come again in Sorek and it was fated that on this day should arrive news of final victory over Assyria. At word of conquest every house flung out its silken banners. Priceless carpets were draped over balconies where should sit the gentlewomen who would view the pageants and the streets were thronged with gayly-costumed men in more than holiday mood. All awaited the military parade and the procession of the priestesses from the temple of Dagon. Even the ascetic Jew called upon to frown down this latter celebration, sought out his brightest robes to-day and mingled with the merrymakers, being justified in the sight of men and of his own conscience by the license of the great Assyrian victory.

Almond and olive boughs were fastened over doorways and even camels and horses wore tufts of palm-branches. In the open space in front of the khan, directly opposite Mesech's house, an area had been marked off and here the priest of the sun-god and the maidens of Astarte were to end their public, periodic appearance by the great symbolic dance. This was not to occur, however, until the new moon showed above them and the town gave itself up to a whole

afternoon of preparation for this climax of the day, each step of which was a generous revel.

Fruits of vine and tree, amphoræ of the rich, purple, native wine, veils of gauzy silk, jewels of silver and gold were bought by reckless soldiers and handed out to naked beggar-boys, vagabonds and the bold women who made this privilege of the triumph their opportunity. Everywhere one felt an air of good-natured indulgence. The immense relief afforded by such unlooked-for speed and glory in the ending of the war caused even the old men to welcome this festival of Sorek's tutelary deities and if Dagon should not glut his greed of strong men this night, surely he were indeed an insatiate god!

In this relaxation of body and mind the temple of Jahveh only, took no part. While bells rang from pagan temples and martial towers, music floated from the house-tops and the smoke of incense strayed out to the thronged streets, this temple alone stood with closed doors and not even the trace of an altar fire gave witness that a lamb or a dove had been sacrificed in sympathetic congratulations of the state. What its college of priests and servitors might be doing this royally care-free day, no one questioned and no one cared.

A few of the curious pleasure-seekers added to their contrasted sense of joyous liberty by stopping at the guard-room of Mesech's house and gazing through the narrow opening in the gaol door on the

one prisoner in all Sorek that day. Since the event of Abdul's poisoning, the Assyrian had lain in the official prison, guarded night and day and only the formal value set upon his well-being by the powers at Gaza saved him from summary vengeance.

In the illness that followed the drinking of the tainted water, Abdul had time to adjust his courses to this new state of mind, but no mere matter of days or weeks could reconcile him to any degree to the loss of Delilah. Even the evidence of her deep, tender affection displayed in her warning when he raised the poisoned cup to his lips, attested to him anew the inestimable worth of the woman whose love another had gained.

Time did not cool the ardor of his desire to serve her and so when Manasseh acquainted him with the secret of the money in the temple of Jahveh, he accepted without question, her rendering of judgment as to whom it of right belonged and advised its safe-keeping until such a time as Delilah could be consulted as to the use of it.

For Abdul, knowing Mesech and understanding his daughter, foresaw an inevitable clash between the two, when such generous funds as Manasseh was holding in trust, would make all the difference between a peaceful, unfettered life and the eking out of a hampered existence to the young mother. So Abdul went his way, constantly planning for the comfort and the safety of the woman who was fighting out

her hardest battle alone and whose household save for Manasseh seemed to have forgotten her sorrow.

Selma had been preparing for the coming of Ahab for days and Manasseh had to take pains to keep Delilah out of hearing of the young wife's careless chatter. But early that morning, Ahab had arrived with the news that set all Sorek a-quiver with joy and Selma, silenced at last by a surfeit of comfort, sat in a corner of the court-yard telling over the measure of her good fortune. How different life seemed since the last feast-day of Asshur! She remembered how she had held the brazier between herself and Ahab and with what shrinking and half-heartedness she had lent an ear to his love-making!

How she depended upon his affection now and how proud she was of him! Mesech would doubtless go back to Gaza, Ahab had told her, to receive his reward of the victory in the shape of some high place at court and he, Ahab, would have choice of many easy seats. How would it please her to go to this strange north country, to live in the old Assyrian town that now lay in the palm of the Philistines?

For, in the course of events, Ahab had become Jezrah's man: no steward now; but soldier forever. And Jezrah, Ahab had declared, would never set foot in Sorek again. Selma pondered a moment over this unusual resolve: felt dimly that Delilah was concerned in some way but her own affairs were too many and too important to allow her much inclination for spec-

ulation as to the motives of others and she let it pass.

Ahab in fact, stumbling unaware upon this statement to Selma, slighted the importance of his remark by accounting for it in no way since so doing would involve certain memorable explanations and Ahab avoided giving Selma any details that might render another man interesting to her or that might set her to thinking about experiences that, in the course of ordinary events would never be shared by her. So she never knew what happened as Ahab and Jezrah lay one night watching the dim line where the low hills of Assyria met the sky.

Jezrah, at best no talker and Philistine enough to resent a suggestion of intimacy between himself and a Persian underling, nevertheless fought at times his hard, bitter thoughts by listening to Ahab's chatter of the gossip gleaned from Selma.

Generally Ahab had wit enough to avoid mention of Delilah, but the temptation to pass on to Jezrah what startling information he had lately had from Sorek had assailed him again and again with accumulated force. Perhaps even at this time prudence might have prevailed and Jezrah would have been allowed to come to a knowledge of Delilah's state of mind and body through the natural course of events had not the Captain's jealous spirit, that envied even an underling's conjugal joy, betrayed him into a reference to Selma's prospect of childlessness. The two men sat

behind a wind-break of scraggy boughs with only the stars' glitter and the soft blackness overhead so that Jezrah neither seeing nor guessing how deep had been his cut, went on patronizingly:

"'Tis evil days are come upon us, Ahab! If thou but chance thine eyes upon a maid whose beauty may not hold thee: if but a woman yield herself to whet her lord's desire—so—sons are born to thee! But, deal thou fair—use thy patience till thy marriage gives thee right to father what may come and it follows, thou shalt leave thine heritage to strangers—thy wife goes barren as a stone!"

This veiled taunt of foolish continence, smacking of hated, Jewish probity was too much to be borne and Ahab struck back with instinctive knowledge of where the vital spot in Jezrah lay. . . . Then the storm broke and even in Sorek's daylight, hours and hours away from the border, Ahab shuddered at the memory of the Captain's awful wrath. What finally might have come to pass, had not the line of fire for which they had looked so many nights glimmered in sight just at that time, Ahab could not guess; but he knew that only the fury of his thwarted passion could have driven Jezrah to the lengths that won the fight that night against the monstrous odds, for Sorek.

This, Ahab's wife must not know for since Delilah was inscrutable to him, all women, even his simple-appearing Selma must bear a share of his distrust. So the young wife sat trailing her fingers in the fountain,

experiencing in advance the throb of pride she should feel when Ahab should lead the triumphal march past Mesech's door. She had resented the gloom of the town and particularly of this house of late and even Manasseh was showing the strain of anxiety and of sleepless nights.

But on this day, everything was changed for the better. The very air quivered with joy and even Delilah, though the effort was apparent, was seeming something like her old self—not as one who would forget, but in generous desire for relief to those who shared her sorrow. So when she and Manasseh came walking slowly through the court and stopped at the fountain, Delilah inquired of Selma concerning the details of the victory, of the town's preparation for the celebration and forced herself to fall in with Manasseh's suggestion and Selma's enthusiastic demand that she view the triumphal procession since it was about to pass her father's house.

The late afternoon sun was already throwing long shadows and when Manasseh had bound Delilah's head in the gold-starred purple veil, she threw about her the robes of state that had lain neglected since the last feast-day of Asshur. Then four slaves appeared with unaccountable promptness and before Delilah could realize it, poles of polished ebony were slipped through the curved arms of her chair and she was carried away and set upon the dais that had been raised outside the great doors.

As they appeared, Mesech nodded his thanks to Manasseh with whom he had labored to bring about this appearance of Delilah. Soon this exile in Sorek would be past, he assured himself, and the episode of his daughter's relation to Samson of which he had been able so far to avoid recognition, would be done with and in Gaza they could begin life anew. He had not been without fatherly consideration of her well-being: had noted in stealthy observation her apparently perfect health and in his planning had provided for all the practical emergencies of her state. So he nodded an amiable, courteous greeting when the three muffled women established themselves behind the row of dwarfed, myrtle trees that had been placed to hide the rough unfinish of the structure. There they could see all that came before them, and yet be not too openly exposed to curious observation.

Before them stretched the open space in front of the khan and beyond was the wide, white, forked road, one branch of which led straight up to the temple of Dagon in the grove of Astarte while the other ran directly to the eastern gate of Sorek. The surging, careless crowd, the changing color and the varied noises coming through the medium of her changed condition, seemed as strange to Delilah as if she had never seen it all before. This same embroidered robe had lain across her shoulders and her knees many times. How little did she dream when she tossed it off, with a sigh of relief from its weight

and heat a year ago, under what circumstances and in what mood of mind she would wear it the next time! Did as great changes await her before the next feast-day of Dagon? There would be the child—nothing could change that and Samson would be at peace beside her mother in a sepulchre of stone.

But she was aroused from her thoughts by a shout that drowned all minor noises and the whole throng swept apart, dividing in halves. The military procession was at hand. Selma's bright eyes sparkled beneath her veil, for Ahab representing Jezrah, rode the snow-white camel and following close behind were flower-wreathed chariots drawn by prancing horses. Nodding oxen drew great cedar frames on which were piled Assyrian weapons and all the spoils of war that could be quickly got to Sorek and everywhere were palm-branches and banners. Merchants bearing symbols of their trade, craftsmen displaying the choicest products of their skill, priests of every cult and soldiers marched and sang and cried acknowledgment of the gilded fir-cones, mimic eggs and toy arrows that showered with balls of roses to them from the balconies.

Before the house of Mesech, the procession broke up and each disposed himself to await the passage of the sun-god and the maidens of Astarte. Spicy food and jars of wine were brought from the khan and in the characteristic boast of heathen folk, wordy compliments were given and taken. Then Mesech

commanded a target to be brought and the best bowmen were called to engage the restless crowd until the glittering sun-god and the white-robed maidens should appear.

Even Delilah was beguiled a moment of her sorrow, to see a man take his place, lift his bow and the arrow flash through the black hole burned in the cedar board—all in an instant, it seemed. But this sport palled and strong-armed youths vied with each other in throwing heavy balls of brass. Then Sorek's best wrestlers were matched and Delilah felt a fierce pain tug at her heart, as the strong, white limbs flashed in the deepening twilight.

Still the priestesses had not emerged from the grove on the hill and Mesech caused torches to be stuck into the earth around the improvised arena: carpets were unrolled and musicians were stationed out of sight under the scaffolding of the dais. Then two dancing women, hid in veils of silver tissue, sprang into view and Delilah felt her heart bound up to her whitening lips. But the notes the music played and the figures the women traced were strange to her. They danced of battle, of victory, of a nation's rejoicing. The music exulted with all living men: it did not mourn for one who was dead, so neither to sound nor to movement did Delilah lend eye or ear.

Never before to-day, had she fought so long and so consciously the hysteria that beset her. For this reason she had chosen to walk in hall and court and

garden to greet her father's people. Were she alone, one instant, the incessant calling ringing in her ears drove her almost to madness and did she close her ears, a dim and changing image of Samson stood before her—not strong and comely as he had been, but sad with a woe she could not understand.

The feeling that she must brush away some veil-like thing that lay about his face caused her to put up her hands but the movement dispelled the vision and again must she confess the illusion of it all—that she was alone in Sorek and that he lay dead in the desert!

The dance had ceased and upon the hill a bugle-note sounded but the spell-bound circle did not move. Mesech rose to warn them that the carnival of Dagon was at hand but the sound of his speech was lost in the demand for the dancers again, that rose from all throats as one voice. He pointed to the path that led from the temple but they would not understand. He saw the sun's last beams light the many-rayed, golden head-dress of the mummer-god, his loin-cloth of gilded lamb's skin, and the long, straight tube he was holding to his lips. The man's body swayed in slow, rhythmic motion as he walked, and behind him followed two score of young women, clad in decent white robes, with floating hair and closed eyes, imitating in gentler motion the swaying gait of their leader.

They had left the hill and were passing now along

the road that led around the town and Mesech knew to what fantastic length that simple swing would grow even before they reached the market-place. Time enough to displace the martial mood his entertainment had inspired: time enough to prepare the waiting men for a fit reception of the priestesses so at a word from Mesech the dancing women bounded out before the torches. It had now grown quite dark in the valley.

Then Delilah quivered as if a lash had struck her. The magic music wiped out the ring of dusky faces behind the torches from her sight. It was morning: again those women danced on a sunlit marble floor and again Samson bent over her and she felt his warm hands cover hers. The perfume of opening myrtle buds was about them as before and though her senses were growing blunt again, she felt the pressure of his fair head on her knees. Then the music's swelling seemed to catch her up and between the picture of the swaying figures and the sun-washed court, there came a misty vision of a great, strange house, of rows on rows of alien faces and of Samson, standing there alone!

She strained to reach him but something came between. Back she sank and again he sat beside her and again it was morning—morning in the world and morning in her life—she laid her arm about his neck. See! the slender silver chain! . . . Ah, clouds again and there he stood above her in that strange,

great place alone! But the Teraphim still lay upon his breast!

Had he cast her away that she had lost him again? Had her unconsecrate hands touched these precious things that were so dear to him? She held her hands out for pardon but she could not touch him and it seemed he would not see. Then the music wailed and pleaded: it told her loss to him: it spoke the words she could not say and when it cried with a voice that tore the veil between them—"Thou art priest—bless them!" he understood at last and catching her in a mighty grasp, together they fell—fell—but the men behind the torches were gaping breathless at the closing measures of the dance and not one of them saw.

The dancing women, not daring to tempt for one moment the passions they had aroused, darted from sight and before the spectators realized that they were gone, the shrieks of the frenzied priestesses broke in upon their ears. In a moment all was confusion and each man willingly casting aside the lesser delight for the greater, crowded over the other for the first sight of Astarte's devotees.

The priest had plucked at his golden fleece until only shreds of wool remained and blood flecked the foam that gathered upon his lips. The priestesses that had started so decorously from the grove had, as their passion grew, tortured their hair into matted balls, torn their garments from their bodies and now

wholly out of accord with one another and the rhythmic notes of the sun-god's horn, jerked and twisted in repulsive yet fascinating frenzy.

Mesech's love-dance had not been wasted on the men to whom he had offered it and they joined the excited townsmen in hemming in the procession. Some yelling and beating the earth, grovelled in drunken ecstasy and the more sensitive, goaded to sympathetic action by the convincing contortions of the priestesses, forced the sensation or aped the expression of the grossest human emotion. The madness grew as the darkness deepened and when the task of the maidens was accomplished, the sun-god breaking through the entranced ring dashed yelling up the hill and the naked women followed.

Then Manasseh, standing sentinel behind the closed casements above them breathed a prayer of thanksgiving to her God: for in a rapture of pain that transcended the pleasure Astarte had promised this night, Delilah lay battling with death.

CHAPTER IX

Abdul stood in the court-yard of Mesech's house watching the gauzy-winged insects that hung over the pool, possessed of an infinite patience to await the summons that might come the next moment, the next hour or never. So surely had the spirit of renunciation done her perfect work that little was left of the Abdul who had come out to Sorek for temporary, expedient, self-imposed exile, unwilling even to venture any considerable part of his interest in the affairs of the town that harbored him. But little by little the rock of his self-concern had been undermined and at the revelation in Delilah of the beauty that is one with goodness, his egoism fell with such a crash of disintegration that no resurrection of his old self was possible.

With an intuition that kept him in distress, he had known that some unusual thing hung over Delilah, during that whole feast-day of Asshur but urgent duties in other directions prevented his going to her until the pageant of the military celebration had set out. Then with mounting foreboding, he had arrived at Mesech's house just in time to step upon the dais with Ahab who had come to remove the women, at the instant that Delilah with a white, blank face sprang to her feet and then fell to the floor without a sound.

Mesech did not see what had happened and neither Manasseh nor Selma realized what they saw until she had been taken away. No slaves dared touch the precious burden. Between them, Abdul and Ahab carried her to the apartment that once before the former had entered—but in what different spirit! Now it was the shrine of his goddess and as he laid her on the wide, low bed he would gladly have taken upon himself the agony of the trial that awaited her. But Manasseh with cheeks as blanched as the face of the unconscious woman, set her teeth to share the travail alone.

She drove them all, even Selma, out before her, praying only for relief from the noise of the revelry below. And indeed Abdul had already resolved upon certain desperate measures to put an end to the demoniacal fury that raged in front of the house, whose shrieks and yells no one could escape; but before they could be brought into action, the temple-folk had made their sudden departure. Abdul quickly cleared the open space of what drunken stragglers had not followed the women of their own desire and quiet was at last secured.

So the long, dark hours of watching began again and just as the labor of bearing the world-pain may transcend the stress of any single mortal's hurt so Abdul's suffering this night was less endurable than when with the Assyrian he had fought to bring Delilah back to life.

What she, the woman, meant not only to him who desired her, but to her own self, her child and the world that moved around her he was just beginning to understand. The acute realization of what a pitiable waste of vital power it would be, should she not live, made up suffering the like of which he had not known before. Justice—simple, human justice, he argued as if he strove with a reasonable thing, demanded that she should live. Then in a snatch of desperate faith he, world-child and pagan, prayed—prayed in mute appeal to the unknown god that rules the turns in human destiny. What though he forfeit the peace and freedom of his choice (as the superstition that goes always hand in hand with faith suggested) that did not matter: nothing mattered but that Delilah be saved: that once again her smile, her sweet, gay laugh, the quickening kindness of her heart be kept to cure the world—the sick, sad world around her!

And so it seemed his faith had won reward; for when the pigeons in the early morning began to flutter from their nests, they told him Samson's child was born. Abdul thought he felt the measure of her joy, but he could not know in any way what vast, deep currents of thought and feeling filled Delilah when she saw over the infant's face that ineffable blending of strength and sweetness that was peculiarly of Samson. She laid the bronze circlet of his hair on the shining little head and when she saw how marvelously they were one, her son's hair and his father's, for the

first time since Love had found her, was she eased of her heart-hunger and a peace unthinkable encompassed her.

Abdul had gone away in humble content and for two days wandered about his house with a pretense of making ready for the journey back to Gaza. But at nightfall Ahab had come to him in haste. A fever had set in, he explained, and they feared the worst that could befall. If Delilah knew what she was saying they could not tell for she spoke in rapid, disjointed utterance but twice they had caught the sound of Abdul's name.

So he went back to her but found no recognition in the bright blaze of the eyes that met his and the hot, dry hand he touched was wholly unresponsive. Manasseh insisted that Delilah had called him and so he waited—waited through the night and now another day was come. As in a dream, he went with Mesech to the palace prison where the spy was given over to the guards that took him on to Gaza, listening, hoping every second for the summons that still would not come. He wondered what was going on behind that mask of Mesech's for mask it surely was that with such dreadful thing portending, he could peer into every nook and corner of the petty state concerns that seemed to occupy his mind. And Abdul wandered back to where bees and flowers and falling water, at least could take his eyes.

Then, as last they called him and before he could

grow accustomed to the dimness of the room, she spoke to him and he followed the guidance of her voice.

"Ah, Abdul," she whispered, when he knelt beside her, "how shall I die—how shall my child be reared for Samson!" She held the infant tight against her breast and her eyes were wide with fear. The horror of her resistance sickened Abdul and he could not speak. "Tell me, Abdul," she persisted, "who shall give our Samson back to life if I rear him not his son?"

Abdul mutely pointed to Mesech but the dying woman's eyes refused the suggestion and she held the child the closer.

"Nay—what great unfairness hath been done to me, shall not descend to Samson's son! My child is born of Israel, Jew of Jews!"

Her voice broke in its raised note of protest. Mesech moved toward her but she shrank from him.

"They will deny his birthright: hold him down to what his blood resisteth," she cried with growing excitement, "and the end—what shall it be! I can not die—I will not die!" she shrieked.

Mesech, unable longer to endure the strain put upon his emotions, dropped to the floor beside Abdul. "I did what seemed best," he moaned. "But for thy son, I swear I will take counsel of thee." Delilah who fought for breath, stared incredulous. "Thou shalt

say, my child, and I will do thy bidding," he went on, "only speak, I pray thee."

She closed her eyes and Manasseh thinking she swooned put water to her lips, but she would not drink. After what seemed long minutes to those who waited she opened her eyes again and looked at Abdul.

"Dost thou hear, my friend—and thou, Manasseh?" she asked and her gaze traveled slowly from one to the other as if she took their oaths. "He will see my will be done when I am dead and he can bind or loose. Dost thou pledge thy word to this, father?" Her eyes did not leave Mesech until he had given assurance. The child stirred and folding it tightly in her arms again she did not speak for a time.

Outside they could hear the shouts of the camel-drivers and the snatches of a song floated up to them. The moments dragged interminably and at last Delilah broke the silence of the room.

"Thus do I charge thee, father, by the grave of Samson and the memory of my mother that the child be given to Israel—Sorek's Israel—Samson's Israel. Bid the Hebrews mark him, brand him, make him theirs, and then—" her voice sank to a whisper but she forced the words out and they all heard, "then, if that great Leader they have lost through me, Delilah, be not given back to them in fuller, better measure—then—I know—there is no—God of Israel! Thus I charge thee!"

She gasped and fell back to her pillow. Her face was purple with the great effort she had made. To think clearly, to speak clearly, to make them understand—had she done it! Her reason, fighting mysterious forces that struggled to possess it, again and again eluded her grasp and hovered like a bird—now just out of reach and now soaring away was lost in the clouds above her.

Manasseh, fearful that harm should come to the child, made futile efforts to induce Delilah to ease the pressure of the strong arms about it and when at last the nurse actually laid hold upon it to take it from the dying mother, she threw her off and sat up with new-found strength.

“Thou shalt not touch the child!” she cried and reason taking final flight, the eyes that had lately been sane enough, now blazed in a frenzy of sudden madness that sees through shams to truth. “None shall touch him save the one that keepeth faith!” Her glance darted excitedly about her, including Abdul in a fury that it broke his heart to see. “Nay—none shall touch him,” she shrieked, “for they touch not Samson’s child but her who bore him!” Then Abdul who feared that his nearness troubled her, went to a far corner.

Presently Delilah spoke again in the same hard, high voice. “Think you they shall take him from me? Nay!” she cried with a smile of scornful defiance that sat pitiably sad on her white, drawn lips. “Deli-

lah can not die—she liveth! But thou—thou diest—and we—triumph—”

Her breath failing, she sank back with closed eyes, not resenting Manasseh's touch when she wiped the death-damp from her brows, and Abdul could not choose but come near her again. After a while she smiled at them with the old sweetness and when the child moved she raised it and pressed its head against her cheek. “So small, so warm—so golden, like thy father,” she murmured caressingly with closing eyes, “thou—shalt—be—” but the words trailed off into a sound that was half caress and half moan.

Then silence. Then no more of Delilah.

Through what was left of the morning they sat there and only by the fluttering breath did they know that her tortured heart still beat. A gust of wind from a sudden noon-day storm blew open the casement: a shower of rose petals fluttered across the bed and Abdul who was watching with eyes sharpened by a holy love, bent over to catch her last breath and as he touched the pallid, stiffening arms the waking infant smiled and fell upon his hands.

CHAPTER X

The moon that rose so slender and so silvern over Dagon's temple that feast-night had now grown to a golden disk as Mesech passed through the silent streets of Sorek. He had ridden far with Ahab and Selma and had finally forced himself to take leave of the child that in a fortnight had grown strangely into his heart. So he was coming back to the great dreary house that was even more unhomelike because the preparations for the removal to Gaza had begun. The beast dragged on slowly at its own will for Mesech was again going over the reasons why he had let Ahab take the child. The great gates closed behind him and he did not note that Manasseh awaited him until he had thrown the reins to the sleepy slave-boy.

"What!" he exclaimed surprised from his meditation when she stepped out before him. "Why art thou not in thy bed, Manasseh?"

"What hast thou done with the child?" she demanded.

"He is gone into our new possessions with Ahab and with Selma." Mesech replied doggedly, striving to pass her but she barred the way.

"Hast thou not considered thine oath to thy dead child?"

"Thou knowest, even as I do, Manasseh," he answered with a patience that matched her indignation, "that if oaths be given to madmen they are void. We go to Gaza presently. Who takes a babe to Gaza?"

"What she required of thee with her last breath, was considered through many days—even from the beginning," she began, but straightway cast aside all attempt at argument and burst out: "Thou knowest, Mesech, that the child belongs to Israel—to Sorek, not to thee!"

"To Israel!" He laughed contemptuously. "What Israel? The Israel a dying woman dreamed of in her pain? Where shall we find such Israel? Who thinks of Samson, now?"

"Do thou but get the child for me and I will show thee," she answered clutching at the straw his tolerance held out. "Thou canst not know of Israel—thou canst not feel the heart that beats—"

He broke in upon her with a hard, uneasy laugh as if he fought his own misgiving.

"Talk not of hearts, but of where to grow a man. This old Assyrian town is new in Syria—place to garner wealth and honor! Ahab craves a son: his wife is gentle, she is thrifty. So, shall they keep the child: make him their own and I have given them money." His lips closed flat and he felt his self-confidence grow.

"Money!" Manasseh burst out after a pause. "How

much money do you grant them if they rid thee of thy burden?"

Mesech, letting the taunt pass in pretended good-nature named the sum.

"Ha! the puny handful!" Manasseh laughed derisively. "I shall measure thee by bagsful, coins of gold, bars of silver an hundred—yea, a thousand-fold if thou but give the child to me!"

Mesech's balancing wrath arose at this and his words stinging fell upon Manasseh's unguarded heart like drops of molten metal.

"Thou art grown old, Manasseh. It is not meet that the care of tender youth be left to thy failing powers. Hadst thou kept thine eyes open, hadst thou seen to the ways of the child I did entrust to thee, this present calamity, touching even thy people of Israel had not come upon us."

The trill of a nightingale broke in upon them and he waited in patience and finished without pity.

"Since thou hadst no wisdom to guide a gentle, yielding maid, how canst thou train a man to virtue!" He saw the narrow, yellow teeth bite down into the shrunken lip but she did not speak and he went on.

"And yet have I another cause for sending the child with Ahab and with Selma. By virtue of my patience have I suffered deep of Israel and now I cry me quit of Jews forever!"

"Didst thou have thy boasted gold at hand to buy my daughter's offspring; didst thou even by some

magic grant him place and power, yet shouldst thou not touch him nor shall he dwell in Sorek! He shall be Philistine, never Jew nor shall he know thy people. To that good end and since one Jew spreads dissension, no Hebrew steps on this new land we lately gained by battle. This shall be decreed and do thou keep thy gold in store, Manasseh, for since the tribute time is near, it may be, it shall serve to save a thousand Jews. Not one mongrel infant!"

He ceased with his anger wholly under control and the breath left Manasseh through her teeth in a whistling sob. Under her robes, her fingers automatically stretched and drew together, with a feline impulse to kill but she neither spoke nor moved when he turned his back upon her.

A glorious moonlight streamed down into the court and put to shame the tapers burning in the room that she had been decoyed to leave until they could steal the child away. She sank down where she stood, unwilling to go to the place where everything she saw would remind her of all she had lost—the child, Delilah, Samson—but what was that! From out the shadow of an aloe tree opposite, a figure moved, taller and broader than any one in Sorek since—; it was no one but Omar and she struggled to her feet.

"Why art thou in this place at this hour?" she demanded by way of greeting.

"Our Lord Abdul hath sent me with tidings to Mesech. As I waited, by chance I slept."

"What message dost thou bring to him who goeth himself straightway to Gaza?" she questioned but Omar knew Manasseh's power of divination and he felt safety in silence only.

"Is somewhat befallen Abdul?" she asked, in real concern.

"It is well with Abdul. My tidings go to Mesech."

"Come!" she answered and moved swiftly before him. But she did not take him by the shorter route to the upper room, by way of the balconies. She guided him around the halls and when they had come to the door under the stairs, she pointed to it.

"He is there," she said and went swiftly from him down the corridor.

Mesech stood at the slanting desk sorting a pile of rolled parchments when Omar entered, and he started with a frown of weary impatience at the intrusion.

"Who did fetch thee?"

"Thy woman."

Mesech crossing the apartment, swiftly opened the door under the stairway, but the moonlight streaming down the long passage-way showed it empty and there was no niche where one might hide within ear-shot.

"She did not go the length of it," Omar offered, indicating that he too was cautious of eavesdropping, "and then made a turning."

"To the right or to the left?"

"To the right."

"It is well." The door closed and Mesech pointed

to the divan. "What dost thou bring from Abdul?"

"Only a tongue to speak," answered Omar spreading his empty hands.

"Then—answer quickly. Is the Jew yet alive?"

"He hath been dead ten days."

A sigh of relief broke from Mesech and he sat beside the speaker to concern himself with the details.

"Of his own intent?" he inquired when the welcome news had sunk well in.

"This no man sayeth," Omar answered cautiously.

"How came he to his death, then? Tell thy tale, man!" Mesech demanded impatiently, but Omar took his time perhaps not knowing at what corner to catch the matter up.

"On the feast-day of Dagon," he finally began in slow, awkward speech, "it grew late of the day and they led the priest out before the queen's portico. His face was swathed in linen bands that no woman might be shocked by his staring eyes and all marveled that such report of wondrous feats should come concerning him.

"What might these marvels be?"

"'Tis said he lifted blocks of stones and balls of brass that ten men might not raise and though they turned him every way to bring confusion, he always found the east."

Mesech smiled at the simplicity of urban Gazans. "In day-light, may one feel the sun's side of the sky!"

But Omar vowed that no sun shone in Gaza on that day and that stone and marble interposed between the sky and Samson. He told how the blind man being led out did not in his usual manner give obedience. The gaoler coaxed, the crowd shouted but Samson had seemed deaf as well as blind. Then it happened, Omar said, that out of the clouds that hung ominously low, a lightning burst above them and because it seemed to linger about the priest, no one durst touch or speak with him again. The women had even shrunk back in terror for they felt the god-like presence of the man and as they watched in palsied silence, Samson bent and circling with his mighty arms the slender, marble pillars that stood, hung with purple cloth, before him—with them both he fell!

“To his death?” Mesech asked breathelssly marveling at many things.

“Nay. Three days his body labored with his spirit and on the third he died.”

“At morn—at eve—when died he?”

“At full noon-tide he died and when at last they could unlock the one clenched hand no man had dared as yet to open, they found this ring within and bade me bring it thee.”

Mesech looked and on the rough, hard palm of Omar lay the carven, golden circle he had not known was in existence, the ring his gentle Jewish wife had given him years ago. What was the magic of this Jew? How came this ring to Samson? How was

it that Samson there in Gaza and his daughter here in Sorek should sicken, labor and die as one body!

His whirling senses denied him reason and he dropped the ring into a box that lay beside him.

"I am beholden to thee for the caution of thy delivery," he at length said to Omar, "yet, Abdul might have spared thee thy pains. I journey with thee back to Gaza."

A sound as if the night breeze had moved a curtain, came in from the balcony and though Mesech did not observe it, Omar waited until he believed that chance for interruption was past and when he spoke again, Mesech lost in other thought had almost forgotten his graceless observation.

"In Sorek or in Gaza must thou take the tale from me. Egypt hath shown her wish for peace and Abdul hath gone thither. If it please his fancy in that sun-baked, ancient country he comes not out again. He prays thee word of the child as often as there is passage into Egypt and sends thee this in token of thy courtesy to him here in Sorek."

He dropped on Mesech's careless knees a pliant coil of gold that would pass around a man's arm. From it depended colored gems, loosely but securely hung, each in its tiny basket of woven, golden thread. In the light of the one torch that flared above the men, the stones looked like imprisoned coals of fire, but Mesech regarded the bracelet with no warmth of

appreciation and when Omar had gone, he dropped it with no farther notice into his bosom.

For him, lights were playing around greater, mightier centers than those sparkling gems. With the inherent fatalism of his blood, he saw how events had linked together through his life-time and how the chain had brought him to the place where he could lay his hand on the one thing on which his will had fixed.

There was in his heart a strain of natural grief for the loss of Delilah; but the concern she had caused him during the past year gave her taking-off a certain, aspect of relief for him.

This pulsing woman from whom there was no escape was a constant source of upheaval of surfaces that in Mesech's calculation required to be fixed. She had constantly made impossible the pursuit of his one idea. The loss of Delilah's son he regretted most of all, but at all times his best judgment approved his course with regard to it; and what shadow of unreasonable protest remained in his mind, he met by planning concerning the increasing sums of money he should regularly provide for the coming man.

Samson was dead. This was the fact that delivered Mesech from his prison of unrest. Straight and clear lay his pathway, now. In Gaza he could climb—could attain and nothing could hold him down. Even his own being no longer harbored antagonistic impulses. He rejoiced that neither passion nor appetite could

divert him now: that all gross demand for pleasure and easy lying had been burnt out by the fire of his ambition.

Thus he sat and mused until his increasing self-satisfaction brought natural repose and after he had beaten the torch against the stones of the wall until harmless, blinking points of fire remained, he passed out to his rest.

The sparks of the resin-soaked cedar had not yet died when Manasseh with livid face and blazing eyes darted into the room. She searched the box into which Mesech had dropped the ring.

Yes, it was there—the ancient, sacred symbol! “Jahveh—God of Israel,” she moaned. What had she done! Samson sightless, making sport for harlots there in Gaza!

She writhed in a hopeless task of comprehending the fulness of the horror. Why had she believed the foolish, paltry lie! Why had she not heeded the inspired unrest of the sensitive Delilah when she, Manasseh, had been deaf to the constant appeal the blind exile had made to them?

For the unutterable sin of faithlessness and torpor, she prayed her God would strike in sudden, perfect vengeance. But no merciful bolt pierced the darkness and she tore her hair and beat her flat bosom only to see the more clearly the needless tragedy of the blind man calling, calling and she had not permitted Delilah to hear! Day by day, praying for the safety of the child,

she had given, over and over again the stultifying assurance that Samson lay dead in the desert! Why had she interfered! Could not Jahveh who made the miracle of love and of the child, guard that which He had created? It flashed upon her in this frenzy of clear-seeing, what she had done when she loosed the leopard the morning that its short liberty had ended with its life. She almost swooned in terror when she realized the fatal cost of her mistaken zeal. There was no surcease of suffering: the more she labored the greater the mountain of dreadful error grew. She thought of Mesech, wondering if memory tortured him as he sat there after Omar had gone. What had driven Mesech to the lie that slew his daughter?

Then, word by word, what he had said to her came back in its full significance. He was quit now—freed of the thing he did when he took the sweet, young, Jewish girl to wed. One Jew would spread dissension and no Jew should step into that new country! “Ha!” Manasseh laughed a terrible, noiseless laugh as when a fiendish god has found his vengeance. No Jew in that new country! What of the man-child, born of Israel, Jew of Jews? What had happened by Mesech’s monstrous interference but that the choicest stock of Israel be set where his foolish boast had been there should be no Jewish blood?

Manasseh saw that the story of Delilah—love of beauty and of goodness set against vain pride of race and greed of honor—would be written again in

stronger, fiercer outline. And this, her want of faith and Mesech's lack of truth had compassed!

If for a moment, some stern comfort was granted by the thought of the eternal recreation of love and the actual physical immortality of the divine spark struck between her two beloved children, yet this fine philosophy did not delude her into hope for the remission of her sin and again her grief bore her beyond the bounds of reason when she thought of Samson, making sport for harlots there in Gaza and Delilah here in Sorek, straining to catch his calling, yet holding back from hearing for the sake of the child that should replace him.

This, Manasseh could not forgive herself and if, by sheer force of exhaustion she became quiet for a while, it was only to find new strength to trace the endless mazes of her sorrow.

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